

The hymn we just sang is Luther's take on a much older Latin chant. The story of the origins of this chant is that a monk was watching workmen building a bridge across a wide gorge in the Swiss Alps, the scaffolding collapsed, and the workers fell to a sudden end. This moved the monk to pen the Latin words *Media vita in morte sumus*: "in the midst of life we are in death." In the midst of life we are in death.

Well, maybe not *us*. We go through life relatively shielded from the reality of death. We are quite accustomed to not having to deal with it on a regular basis. Unlike past ages it is not a part of our daily experience. Where in previous generations it was the family who cared for the sick, the aged, and the dying, and the visitation took place in the home and the family bore the casket to the churchyard, that is no longer the case today.

That we have lost much of this does us a great disservice. Nowadays we make our way through our day, and then suddenly, terribly, the snare of death catches one whom we love, will one day spring upon us. At that moment, despite all our best efforts at avoiding death in daily life, despite the best attempts of the funeral industry, despite all the clever (and, admittedly, sometimes humorous) euphemisms we use to paper over the reality, to not look what is staring us in the face straight on in the eyes, it happens. Death strikes, sometimes quite unexpectedly, and it hurts. We each experience this in our lives at some point.

It hurts not just because it sometimes comes as a surprise, it hurts because this is not how it was meant to be. We were not meant to die; it is not a natural part of life. Death in and of itself is never good or beautiful. It is horrid and unnatural as it is for parents to bury a child, for Jairus' daughter to die at a mere 12 years old. It is also horrid and unnatural that a life of long years, filled with the receiving and giving of God's goodness, should ever have to end. The hymn today is hard to sing because we forget and would rather ignore, even outright deny the truth of what it teaches. Our easy comfortable lives lull us into complacency. We need this hymn. It teaches us just admit it, enables us to take a dose straight up, no chaser and say the bitter truth: "Death is real. Death is horrible, it's scary, and we deserve it."

Death is what comes from turning from the word of God, the only thing by which we live. We have each done that, every one of us. And in so doing, in our father Adam's sin, death is made to encompass the world. In midst of what we call life, we are in death. Even when we are spared having to see it, spared having to suffer that loss for a time, even then we see death all around. By this I mean the death that characterizes life without God even as we draw breath. Life for the self, for gain, for pleasure, life at the expense of others. It's as old as sin, with Adam and Eve taking what was not given them, seizing what Satan had told them God was so cruelly withholding from them, running from God, blaming one another, blaming God Himself. And so we have all done ever since. So it is that we see the just desserts, what comes of turning away from life.

We do right to cry out and pray: *Holy and righteous God! Holy and mighty God! Holy and all merciful Savior! Eternal Lord God! Save us lest we perish in the bitter pangs of death. Save us from the terror of the fiery pit of hell! Have mercy, O Lord!*

This is the hard pill we must swallow. We are entirely lost and at a loss on our own. It's hard to say. We'd rather not, let alone sing it. But like the bitter medicine we reflexively want to spit out, like the chemo drugs or radiation that burn and kill healthy cells as well as the cancer, it is necessary to be cured.

And who is the physician who administers this medicine? It is God Himself. It is He who utters the sentence, "**In the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.**" This is not just a punishment, it is simply what comes from turning away from life. He opens your eyes to see the truth. The physical eyes see the consequence. You need God's Word and the ministry of the Holy Spirit to tell you why. This drives you to confess, to say what you do in the confession of sins: I "justly deserve...temporal and eternal punishment."

But there is not only bitter medicine. That alone is a sorry, miserable place to be left. Cutting out a tumor or bad organ alone without stopping the blood, giving fluids, or closing the incision will kill you. Chemo alone, without the mitigation of side effects can do the same. You need pain and death kept aback. You need life to be put into you. And so it is that your Divine Physician does not leave you lying open on the operating table. His goal is not to give pain, but life and restoration. He wants us back to how we were before sin, better even. Thus He gives sweet relief as He directs your eyes

away from yourself, away from the sin and sorrow within, away from the horrors that surround and frighten you. He sets before you the figures of today's Gospel, showing you that in the midst of death we have life.

Jairus, whose daughter was suddenly snatched by death's jaws, and the woman who, in her own way, was dying a slow death for 12 years, both show you where to go. *Where shall we for refuge go, Where for grace to bless us? To Thee, Lord Jesus, only!*

Today's Gospel shows you the confidence of faith as you hear Jairus say after his daughter has already died: "**come and lay Your hand on her, and she will live.**" You hear the confidence of faith as the woman who has spent all her money on doctors and only grew worse, says to herself: "**If I only touch His garment, I will be made well.**" They acknowledge the horrid reality; they do not deny it, do not explain it away as just part of the natural order of things, singing *Ob-la-di ob-la-da*, life will go on somehow. They accept it, and they flee and cling to Jesus as the One who has come to undo that terrible reality that was never meant to be.

And that is exactly what Jesus does. In the very midst of death stands Life itself, and it is no contest which will win out. For Jesus, raising the dead is not only possible, it is a light and easy task. Luther has this great line about when Jesus raises Lazarus, the reason Jesus calls him by name, "**Lazarus, come forth!**" is because if He just said, "**Come forth**" the whole cemetery would have been raised. And so it will be. There is a day coming on which that very thing will happen.

The Lord Jesus has the authority to give orders to the dead and they listen. He has become the Master of death for He has entered into its gaping jaws, down into the stinking gullet of a grave in the earth, and He has torn it open! The fearful sentence that lies upon us for our sins, for our turning away from life, is now the very thing that God has made His enemy. It is death, not we poor sinners, that has God's sights set on it. He will empty it of all its prey, bring all our loved ones who have died in the faith, whose bodies we commit to rest for a time, will arise again, alive and free.

It is easier for our Lord to raise the dead than for us to wake up a slumbering person. This is shown to be sure and certain when Jesus speaks of His blessed dead, of Jairus' daughter, later of His dear friend Lazarus. He says that they are sleeping. This is how Jesus and the Christian faith teach us to see death. For a Christian it is a blessed sleep.

It's still an enemy, and only God knows the hour at which it will come and that frightens us. But you now see this truth in light of our Lord Jesus. He has forced it against its will to become the means of entry for His Christians into that heavenly rest of which we heard last Sunday. He has gone into it, has come out, and so will you. Until that day, the souls of the faithful departed rest, they are comforted, and they pray for us in the church on earth while their bodies sleep. That's what "cemetery" means; "sleeping place."

And so we are taught by our Lord to see our death in the same way we see our bed, a place of peaceful and brief sleep, a place where our bodies will not remain, but will be awakened as surely as we are each morning from a night's rest. So it is that each time we go to bed, Luther's evening prayer has us rehearse for when our eyes close in the sleep of death, as we commend ourselves, body and soul, to our faithful Savior and Redeemer, to whom we are always alive, in whom our bodies sleep for a time, and who will awaken us to glory on the day when "**He will wipe away every tear...and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore**" (Rev 21:4).

This is the sure pledge and glorious comfort given today to Mabel, that is possessed by all the baptized. Your biggest problem, the obstacle between you and God, has been removed. The down payment, the foretaste, of that sweet bliss of the resurrection, is given already in the Holy Communion. It is what the ancient church called the *viaticum*, the food for the journey, not just through this life, but particularly as you pass into death and the grave. Hence the blessing given at the conclusion of every Holy Communion: "*The body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ strengthen and preserve you in body and soul unto life everlasting.*" With that, you surely can depart and fall asleep in peace.