

With All Saints' behind us we enter into the last weeks of the church year. During these last weeks the church has us contemplate the Last Things. And before the coming of the Lord in glory, before the proclamation of judgment before all creation, before eternal consolation in heaven or eternal torment in hell, there is death. In a way creation itself preaches this warning to us. The rich Fall colors are beginning to fade to brown and the trees are nearly bare. As with all who labor, the workers downstairs today will go home after a hard day's effort exhausted. And gorge ourselves as we shall on succulent turkey, fluffy potatoes, crisp green beans, and rich desserts, as with all food whether it's simple, home-cooked or gourmet and exotic, it will not keep us from aging.

Thus we see fulfilled, we are reminded of the sentence spoken upon man in garden: "**cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life...By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.**" There stands the curse which man's sin brought upon creation and himself. But it is far more severe than this. For when God gave the warning: "**in the day you eat of it you shall surely die,**" it was not just temporal, or bodily death which was meant. Adam and Eve did not drop dead immediately after eating the forbidden fruit. They did die eventually. But the first death, spiritual death, fell upon them as soon as they ate. We see that spiritual death when God comes seeking Adam in the Garden, and Adam's response was to run and hide. He was afraid. He wanted nothing to do with God.

In our spiritual death God is an enemy. We hate Him. We blame Him much as Adam did: "**The woman whom YOU gave me.**" We fear His wrath and rather than repent, we act against it. The atheist has two articles in his creed: (1) there's no god; (2) I hate him. This living death of spiritual enmity with God eventually leads to the divine judgment upon sin in this life: temporal death, which is but the entry into eternal death. The opening hymn today puts all this truth which we need to hear rather bluntly. That is good. Because our day so often denies not just God's wrath and just judgment, but even the very fact of death.

So who shall help us in the strife of this life with the snares of death surround us? Who will help when the powers of hell assail us? Where shall we go for refuge, for grace to bless us when our sins oppress us? Where do we go when we are confronted with the painful reality, the harsh truth, the fact that death is a judgment upon sin, a judgment that we cannot, shall not, escape?

Jairus shows us. He knows his daughter has died. The judgment has come. The wages of sin has been paid. The last enemy has descended upon his beloved daughter before her life had even progressed out of youth. But he directs us where to find our help even in the hour of death: Jesus. He says, "**My daughter has just died, but come and lay Your hand on her, and she will live.**" And Jesus rises and follows him. Unlike so many other occasions, where there's a little bit of a dialogue, where the person doesn't know what they truly need or what they are asking or the disciples don't quite get it, Jesus simply goes. He doesn't say a word. For Jesus death needs no explanation. It is why He has come into this world. That is what He has come to undo. He undoes death by His own. He tramples down death by dying. The prince of life, life itself, dies.

That is where Jesus is going. He takes all the sin, every single sin, every aspect of our spiritual death, our lack of fear, love, and trust in God, and He dies for it. He suffers hell on the cross. And because He does that perfectly, completely, for all, He is raised. He triumphs not just over sin and hell, but death as well. So in Christ we know what is promised to those who die in Him. When St. Paul writes "**The last enemy to be destroyed is death,**" that tells us two things: (1) death is an enemy; (2) its days are numbered. Even that dastardly foe. That wicked thing who robs us of our loved ones, and who will take us, is going to be destroyed. Indeed, by our Lord's resurrection, the hole has already been ripped open in death's belly.

This is how we as Christians are to regard death. We need not fear the fires of hell. Christ has suffered them for us. The devil gets no claim on us. We have no sins, no chains which bind us to him. We have been set free from spiritual death, given new life in our baptism. In Christ we are dead to sin and alive to God. All we have left to endure is that final judgment upon the sinful nature which we have been putting to death since our baptism. All we have left is a brief time in the grave.

Jesus teaches us how to regard this. He tells His Christians how to speak of our death. He tells the crowd of mourners, with their sorrowful dirges played on mournful flutes and making a commotion of how tragic, how sorrowful, how terrible this whole thing is, He tells them, “**Go away, for the girl is not dead but sleeping.**” That is exactly how Christians throughout history have spoken of death. It is but a sleep. We are told how Jacob, Moses, David, Solomon, Hezekiah, and Stephen, all fell asleep, they laid down with their fathers. Jesus speaks of Lazarus as asleep. St. Paul speaks of those who have fallen asleep. This first instructs us about how God regards His saints. As their souls rest in heaven, the bodies are not useless or forgotten. God doesn’t even regard them as dead. They are like a seed, planted in the ground, sleeping until the spring, the dawning of a new day at the Lord’s appearing, awakens them. This is why the first Christians called the places where they lay their dead “cemeteries,” it means “sleep houses.”

For Jesus, raising the dead is not only possible, it is a light and easy task. It is hardly more than rousing a sleeping person saying, “Get up!” Luther has the great line that 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. But that is exactly what will happen on the Last Day. That’s exactly what we sang:

*God's Son to our graves then takes His way,
His voice hear all tribes and nations;
The portals are rent that guard our clay,
And moved are the sea's foundations.
He calls out aloud: “Ye dead, come forth!”
In glory we rise to meet Him.*

Because that is true, because that is how our God regards His people who have closed their eyes in death, so also we are to regard the death of our bodies as but a sleep. It is a sleep from which we will easily and surely be awakened to resurrection glory. What Christ did for Jairus’ daughter is to be proof to you that you should believe Him when He says that He will do the same for you on Judgment Day. With this miracle our Lord kindly and gently invites you not to look at death in fear of it, but rather as a very sweet and brief sleep. It is the moment when you are free from misery, from sin, from the true peril and anguish of death. The danger of sin and unbelief is gone. The devil can tempt and entice you no longer. You will be with Christ; at home with the Lord; resting from your labors; gathered to God’s people, still a part of the one, holy Church, in communion with those on earth. Those are all the ways not the death-denying world, but God’s Word gives us to speak. These sweet names comfort us with the truth of what it means to die a Christian death.

The crowd in Jairus’ house, much like our world today, doesn’t get death. They laughed when Jesus spoke the truth. They wanted to cling to their mourning, to their grief-obsessed customs. They wanted to make it all about the deceased, how good she was, such a sweet little girl, how tragic it was. There again, not much has changed. But even as we Christians mourn, we do weep even as Jesus wept at Lazarus’ tomb, we know about the hole in death’s belly. We know that the body which we lay to rest is doing exactly that: resting, sleeping for a time. So in preparation for our death, at our funerals, as we mourn as Christians. We thank and praise God. We eulogize, that is, “speak well of” Him. We proclaim in Scripture and song what we confess in our creed. Not ourselves. Not comfortless sorrow. But what He has done and what He will do for us.

We do not laugh at this as the world does. We rejoice. We are not bid to doubt, but to trust in our Lord’s promise. And we look forward to the day of the resurrection and the joyful reunion with those we love who have died in the faith, with whom we will sing praises to the holy and blessed Trinity forever, in the true, the greatest, and the eternal feast.