

## Sermon for Judica (Lent V) – John 8:46-59

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

As we press on in the Lenten season, the tension between the scribes and Pharisees (those Jewish elites) and Jesus continues to mount. Their conflict centered on a few substantial arguments that manifest themselves in today's Gospel. The scribes and teachers of the law accused Jesus of being a Samaritan and heretic. They said his doctrine came from the devil. So Jesus challenges them to cite one single sin He's committed and prove it; to find one single error on the solid basis of evidence. "If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?" Next in the controversy, the question: Who were the true sons of Abraham? The Pharisees could claim direct descent from the father of their great nation. And yet the Christ points out that in no way could they be regarded as Abraham's children as they didn't follow in Abraham's faith. Without Abraham's faith, all they had were the works of the Law. And yet, no mere man can keep the law and gain righteousness and salvation through it. Last, these scribes and Pharisees regarded Jesus as only an ordinary man. Their real messiah would give them earthly blessings – that's what they hoped. But Jesus, the true Messiah came to redeem us from sin and preserve us from eternal death. And the patriarch Abraham died believing this faith.

And this is the comfort that we cling to in our day; the very words spoken by Jesus in John Chapter 8: "Truly, Truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." And that's a bold claim for Jesus to make. We want to believe that it's true, but it simply goes against everything we see. As much as the world (and perhaps we) try to hide it, death and grief still hit us. As much as modern medicine has brought us, our bodies and the bodies of our loved ones grow weaker and frailer and we die. It's the devastation we experience in the linear progression of this fallen world.

But Christ's word still stands: "Truly, Truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." What is the meaning of these words? "Truly, Truly..." This is a double promise and a double oath. Christ can speak this way because He Himself is the Truth and the Life. By "Word" Christ means God's very comforting doctrine to us: He sent His Son into the world. He gave Him up into death for us, so that we who were lost shall not be so, but shall have eternal life. This is the Word, says Christ, which must be kept. This is the Word, says Christ, which has to be received into our heart. This is the Word, says Christ, which must be seized with true faith. This is the Word, says Christ, which we must steadfastly uphold.

We continue to hold to this Word. How does this benefit us? We will not see eternal death. It's a benefit that's hidden from us in this life, but seen in the life to come. The Word of Christ is the antidote against eternal death.

Christ's Word serves us against the spiritual death of sins. As we keep Christ's Word, we are saved from spiritual death, for through faith we become united with Christ and Christ lives in us. Jesus said, "Whoever believes in Me shall live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die." As we believe in Christ, we are no longer dead in sin. This is the first resurrection. It took place in our baptism. As partakers of this resurrection, the eternal and second death has no power over us. Why? Through Baptism, Christ lives in us.

What's more, Christ's Word also serves us against natural death. Indeed, it is true that both believers and unbelievers, both those who trust God and those who don't, are all subjected to natural or temporal death. But still, even in this, there is a vast difference between the death of a true believer and an unbelieving person.

True believers grasp Christ's Word in their hearts. Through it, we receive comfort and strength in the midst of death. We don't see death, instead our death is a doorway and entry into eternal life. Even though our eyes will become darkened by death, we still have the light of heavenly comfort and divine peace in our souls. Look at St. Stephen in Acts 7. The rocks were hitting him in the head! At the same time, he was confident, even joyful in his death. Indeed, he actually saw heaven open up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God the Father. Christ also reveals Himself to us and gives us a foretaste of eternal life so that we don't taste the bitterness of death. On the other hand, unbelievers have no comfort in their hearts. They have no rod or staff with them. That's why death is sheer trembling and despair for those without Christ.

So as we keep Christ's Word, we will never enter the second, eternal death. Instead, we will break through from death to life. How can this Word have such power to be the medicine against eternal death? Because the Word which Christ speaks is Spirit and life. It is the power of God which saves all who believe. There is no food grown which can prevent death, but God's Word is given to us as the only antidote against it.

Christ is the Bread of Life. In the Word we seize Christ who Himself is Life Eternal. Whoever eats of the Bread of life will live forever. Those aren't my words, that's the Lord's Words. We march under the banner of the Prince of Life and we will live forever. We are grafted into the Tree of Life and we will not die eternally. Our names are written in the Book of Life and will never be erased from it. The Spirit who is present in the Word is the Spirit of Life. He lives in us, so here we must have eternal life. He will not allow His temples to perish eternally. "Since the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead lives within you, so also will He Who raised Christ from the dead make alive your mortal bodies because His Spirit resides in you." So trust solely in Christ's revealed Word as spoken forth by the prophets and apostles, for your comfort in every anxiety, even in the midst of death itself.

What ultimately happened at the end of the disputation between Jesus and the Pharisees? His opponents picked up stones to throw at Him. Unable to prove Christ wrong, they grab for the rocks. What happens next? Does He die there? No! His time had not yet come. All the Scripture says is that "Jesus hid himself." How could that happen? Isn't He standing in plain sight?

Something was different when you walked into church this morning. You may be wondering why purple veils cover the crosses and statuary in here and around parish halls. Today we enter into the part of Lent called Passiontide. As the Alleluias, Gloria in Excelsis and Te Deums--those great songs of joy--have been stripped from our liturgy, so now today, even the crosses and statues, those great visuals of Christian comfort are hidden from us. We learn all the more to trust our Lord by faith and not by sight. "Jesus hid Himself."

Even still, there is grace for us in this. God the Lord knows how to hide and rescue His own. He covers His children with His protection in evil times; He hides us. Just as no one was able to harm Christ prior to the designated time for His Passion sufferings, so also no one is able to harm in the least way one of Christ's children prior to our arrival at our designated time of death. We rest under the shelter of the Most High and dwell under the shadow of the Almighty. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. He hides us. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠