

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

November 3, 2024

“See, the home of God is among mortals.”

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

This is always a powerful Sunday in the church year. Let's face it, dealing with death and dying is one of the main reasons we need community and connection. Communities of faith are important sources of love and support during times of grief and loss. And so we talk about death in the church. We name it. We acknowledge the reality of it. But that does not mean we don't still wrestle with death and mortality. Quite the contrary, being theologians of the cross, who try to name things what they are, we are invited to open honesty and vulnerability around these topics.

So let's talk about death. The Hebrew scriptures teach us that death is a result of humanity's natural inclination towards self-idolatry.¹ We love to place human will as the ultimate authority. God gives the first humans one rule but since humanity always seeks to exercise our will as independently as possible, those first humans willfully violated that one boundary. Eating the apple wasn't the sin so much as placing our desires over what God intends for a healthy Creation.

But those same Hebrew Scriptures go on to relate the history of God's salvific action in and through the Israelites. Salvific action which will ultimately lead to what Isaiah so beautifully describes as “a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear,”² and that the Lord “will swallow up death forever.”³ So while our Old Testament speaks of the source of death, we also hear the promise that death will not have the final say.

This promise is reiterated in the words we heard from Revelation, words reported as coming from the very throne of God: “Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.”⁴ Death's power and sway over us has an expiration date. There will come a future time when the power of death is broken completely.

¹ Genesis 3

² Isaiah 25:6b (NRSVUE)

³ Isaiah 25:8 (NRSVUE)

⁴ Revelation 21:4b (NRSVUE)

As a matter of fact, death's power has already been broken. But as is often the case in Lutheran theology and understanding, there's paradox at work. Death's power has already been broken, but not yet. We can even see this at work in our Gospel reading today. "Unbind him, and let him go,"⁵ Jesus says after raising Lazarus. Death is overcome, but there's still work to be done!

There is death all around us, which means there's work all around us too. Big deaths that cause grief and suffering; and come with the invitation to offer comfort and support. But also, little deaths that cause anxiety and stress; these come with the invitation to offer hope and healing. We know what it's like to gather at a funeral, in the very presence of death. But we also know the betrayal of a friend, failures at home or work, and other disappointments that remind us how far we are from the abundant life God created for us.

"Unbind him, and let him go,"⁶ Jesus instructs the others there. As is so often the case, Jesus invites us into what God is up to. Jesus didn't come to do the work for us. Rather, Jesus came to start the work and invite us into it, working towards its completion. Jesus breaks the power of death over Lazarus and invites others to join in the continuing work of unbinding him from death. God has broken the power of death over all of us, and God invites us into the continuing work of unbinding others from death too!

This is holy work! This is hard work! And we need help to do it! On our own we **cannot** do this work. But thanks be to God that our God is not far away and aloof! Our God meets us where we are and invites us into the work of the in-breaking Kingdom of God. Our God is located in the person of Jesus, who is the promise of God-with-us!

The Hebrew Scriptures speak of a future hope for the world. Revelation promises us a future where "the home of God is among mortals."⁷ The Gospels promise us a present in which God is active and among us. We are in the in-between time of the breaking of death's power. We have the privilege of joining in the unbinding work of God. What an honor it is to proclaim death's demise!

But we still wrestle with it, don't we? We have all these past promises from Isaiah and the other prophets. We have all sorts of hope proclaimed in John's Revelation. We see in the Gospels, again and again, how Jesus is God-with-us. And yet...we still

⁵ John 11:44e (NRSVUE)

⁶ John 11:44e (NRSVUE)

⁷ Revelation 21:3b (NRSVUE)

wrestle. We're still uncertain. And our uncertainty comes out sideways a lot of the time.

"She's in a better place now." "We loved her a lot, but God loved her most." "He's one of God's angels now." "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." "Everything happens for a reason." "I know it's hard that they're gone, but God will never give you more than you can bear." "God gives the toughest battles to the strongest soldiers." Any of those sound familiar? We're good at those clichés, aren't we? And that should be no great surprise, death is disorienting, confusing...it's the ultimate unknown.

Have you heard of death doulas? They are like birth doulas, but they accompany people who are dying rather than giving birth. It's a beautiful idea, to have someone dedicated to journeying with you as you approach the end of your life. Of course, walking the Way of Christ means we always have a death doula with us.

"See, the home of God is among mortals."⁸ "Jesus began to weep."⁹ "Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him and let him go.'"¹⁰ John of Patmos was clearly thinking of the end-of-times when we had his Revelations. But we can see how his words work with exactly the point Jesus makes in John 11. Jesus is God-at-home-among-mortals. And what does that look like? It looks like grief at the death of a friend. It looks like Christ inviting us into death-defying work.

We can walk the Way of Christ, we can wrestle with death, because we have a companion on the journey, the ultimate death doula, Jesus Christ. Who not only journeys with us in times of death, but who also journeys with us through death into something greater. And to get us there, Christ joins us, meets us, moves us, and commands us to unbind others. To be death doulas for others. Journeying with others in death...but also through death to the next adventure. Amen.

⁸ Revelation 21:3b (NRSVUE)

⁹ John 11:35 (NRSVUE)

¹⁰ John 11:44c (NRSVUE)