

"Holy Baptism: Deliverance from Death"

Romans 6:3-4

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Midweek - Advent 1

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Boise, Idaho

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The Word of the Lord from Romans 6:

Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:3-4)

This is the Word of the Lord.

I. The Inevitable

It's been said more than once that winter is the killing season. The trees are stripped bare and the neighborhood wildlife has gone underground. A cold wind can cut to the bone, and the steely-gray days are short while the frigid nights are at their longest. I've conducted no surveys of other pastors, but ten years in the Holy Ministry have indicated this: a congregation might make it through spring, summer and fall without a funeral service; but rare is the winter where the people of God need not mourn. Winter is the killing season.

It's at the start of winter, when the darkness lasts the longest, that the Church celebrates Christmas. During this long, cold night, the Light of the world is born of Mary. As the cold wind blows, the Savior is born so that we might have life-and have it abundantly, eternally. Call winter the killing season if you want; but as that cold hand grips this dying world, the Church rejoices that the Savior is born.

So we are gathered here by the Holy Spirit at the start of Advent as we anticipate the celebration of Christmas. And, gathering here, we know that that birth is not simply an opportunity to feel good about a baby's birth. This Infant Jesus is not a reminder that life continues in others despite death; He is the Redeemer who overcomes the grave and gives you life in spite of death.

Whether lurking on the fringes of our consciousness or blocking our direct vision, death attends all mankind. All die, for all have sinned. And because mankind generally rejects God's Word, it must come up with some other way to deal with death.

There are the scientific options-not just to extend life, but to defeat death. Scientists examine chromosomes for causes of disease or aging, in the hopes that death can be beaten at the genetic level. Some who are wealthy, well aware that their wealth stops with their breath, pay to have themselves cryogenically frozen in hopes that technology will successfully reverse laws of God and nature. It's all a losing game, though, because the world of science is governed by the law of entropy.

All things fall apart, wear out, die.

So that option fails, leading to another: if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. In a desperate attempt to overcome the grave's terror, man seeks to make death a friend. Many will say that death is simply part of the great cycle of life: we live, we die, and that's how it's supposed to be. Some make this into a religion, declaring that we're simply an organ of greater organism-the Earth, and our life continues after death by fertilizing the greater body. Life and death go together as close companions. We're just aimless accidents who breathe for a while. But if that is the case, then our existence is futile and we have no hope.

Others seek to create eternal life without life or eternity. Some seek to comfort themselves by declaring, "Upon our death, our spirits simply live on and on." This is a nice sentiment, but there is simply no proof. Likewise, others will say that our lives continue by the legacies we leave, the contributions we have made or the families we have brought into being. These things continue, for a while at least, yes; but we still die.

There's one other option, the popular choice of denial. Pretend that death doesn't happen. Pretend there is no such thing as sin or evil or death. Let's just not talk about it. Focus all of society on being young, feeling young, staying young. Make fitness into a god and pay the plastic surgeon. Our society is largely in a huge denial of death; it's one reason why genocide overseas gets little attention, because it seems so unreal. It's also a reason why disasters and terrorist attacks close to home are so shocking: they cut through the imaginary Kevlar that says death is just a concept, nothing more.

Sooner or later, though; we all die. Sooner or later, casket and grave preach Law that cannot be denied-or overcome by science, fond wishes or denial.

Death is close at hand, dear friends, and that would lead us to despair; except that the Savior was born in Bethlehem. And, dear baptized people of God, He has already given you eternal life. You are already alive forever.

II. Holy Baptism

Hear again this Word of the Lord: Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life (Ro. 6:4).

Jesus died for you. You've heard this often enough. He died on the cross to take away your sins: we teach that in the earliest years of Sunday school. But ponder His death for a moment in a different way. On the cross, Jesus died twice. He suffered eternal death-the "second death," and He suffered physical death, too.

The second death came first, and was far more horrific. On the cross, Jesus suffered hell for the sins of the world. We will speak more of this in a couple of week's time; suffice for now to say that God damned His Son on the cross for the sins of all. He forsook His Son and made Him to be sin there (2 Cor. 5:21); thus Jesus suffered an eternity of the second death while He was on the cross. That eternal second death came to an end, however; and before He died, He prayed, "Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit." Jesus had undergone eternal death, and from that He was already

delivered. He therefore declared, "It is finished!"-and then He breathed His last. He suffered the physical death of His battered flesh and blood.

But that was not the end! Three days later, He rose again from the dead. He appeared to the women, then to the disciples, and then to many more. He showed them His body, His hands and His side, demonstrating both that He had died and He was risen. Risen again, He lives and reigns forever. He has conquered the inevitable ends of death and grave.

Now, we embrace and confess this when we recite the Creed; and with joyful anticipation we say, "We look to the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come." This is good news, but it is not all the good news. There is more, and it is this: you do not just look forward to eternal life. You already have eternal life. Jesus gave it to you in your Baptism.

He died your death for sin, suffering God's wrath on the cross. In Baptism, He shares it with you and you die with Him. Having borne the totality of hell for your sin, Jesus shares this death with you with a splash of water accompanied by His Word. If you are asked, "Will you suffer God's judgment for your sin?", an appropriate response is, "I already have suffered all the judgment that is left for me. That is, Jesus suffered it for me, and shared it with me in Holy Baptism."

This is one of your great comforts as you ponder the end of life. You can be absolutely sure that the second death does not lie ahead, because it's already done. You've already died to sin.

But it doesn't stop there. Christ suffered that death and rose again; and not only does He share His death with you, but He also shares His resurrection. You have died to sin in Holy Baptism, and you have been raised up with Christ there. Your once-dead soul now has eternal life already, and will remain alive as long as you remain in Christ.

Of course, we must condemn the error of the one who says, "Since I am baptized and I have already died and risen in Christ, I can now quit church and do what I want. My salvation is secure." This leads only to condemnation, for it really says, "In Baptism, I died to sin with Christ and rose again. But I prefer sin and desire to return to that dead state. No eternal life for me, thank you."

You can see, then, the precious treasure and power of Holy Baptism. And you can see the frightful sin of avoiding it. The one who says, "I believe in Jesus, but I don't want to be baptized" is saying, "I believe in Jesus, but I don't want to die and rise with Him. I don't want Him to share His death and resurrection with me." Faith in Christ and a rejection of Baptism simply do not compute.

You can also see why we bid new parents to hasten to the altar with their newborn children. So great is the curse of sin that even infants suffer death at times; so Jesus was born an infant so that He might go to the cross and redeem them as well. He shares His death and resurrection with them at the font, too.

And you can see why Luther rejoiced, "I am baptized!", not "I was baptized." We do not say, "Once upon a time, I had eternal life with Christ," but "Because of Baptism, I have eternal life in Christ." We do not shout "He was risen!" on Easter Sunday, but rejoice that Christ lives forever. "I am baptized" does the same: it declares that eternal life is already ours now, for the sake of Christ.

What a precious treasure this is!

And this treasure grows only more precious in the face of death. It is important that we drive this point home, because you may not think too much of Baptism when death draws near. This happens in part because, especially if you were baptized as a baby, then your baptism lies in time at the far end from your dying. But it happens even more so because the devil and your Old Adam wish to deny you this comfort. You see, when death is near, it looks like the final end, that the mouth of the grave will swallow you up. But your Savior tells you different. He says, "I've died, and death could not hold Me. I've conquered death of body and soul. In Holy Baptism, I shared that victory with you. Your soul has already been raised up to eternal life; and now, My beloved child, your body is about to be raised up again. Death remains your enemy, but I keep it under My feet; and until I destroy this last enemy once for all, I use it to transform your battered, afflicted body like unto My glorious body. You have been living eternally by faith since the moment I baptized you; now you are about to start living eternally by sight in My glory, too."

I do not pretend to believe that this removes the haunting specter of death or the terror that it will whisper. But even as we do not mourn as those who have no hope, neither do we die as those who have no hope. Dear baptized people of God, rejoice! Christ has died, and Christ is risen. You were dead; in Baptism, you are alive. You have eternal life even now, because you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen