

# "Why Will You Die?" - Ezekiel 33:7-11

16 September Anno DOMINI 2005

Sermon for

## A Service of Repentance and Prayer

at

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church of Boise, Idaho

Rev. Michael L. McCoy, Pastor

at

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church of Emmett, Idaho

Grace, mercy and peace to you in the Name of the LORD our God; that is, in the Name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dear Baptized,

The LORD put His Word into the mouth of Balaam and the man could do nothing but speak of the blessedness of Jacob who was saved by the grace of God through faith in the LORD and who departed this life in peace. Balaam said of such a death and of such a man, "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like his!" (Numbers 23:10). We hear the same prayerful plea of faithful Simeon, "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy Word" (Luke 2:29). Ah, to die in faithful peace. That is dying unto Eternal Life.

But alas, not all deaths are like this. Many are horribly tragic because they are so unnecessary and they end in everlasting destruction. For example, we think of Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus and who died in despair and entered into eternal death. His was a useless death, accomplishing nothing but the opposite of God's truly intended purpose of salvation. There are too many Judases in this world. That is dying unto eternal death.

If, somehow, we were able to identify and speak to a person who was heading to eternal death; that is, to talk to that person before the separation of body and soul took place, we would try to warn them, and if that person would not listen and would not heed the warning, we might ask in a pleading manner, "Why, why will you die? There is hope and righteousness and peace forever for you. Why will you die unto eternal death?"

Dearly beloved, that is God's question. He asks it like this, "Why will you die, O House of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of any one, says the Lord GOD; so turn and live" (Ezekiel 18:32).

That question and the answer to it are the theme for the sermon for this evening's service of repentance and prayer. Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flooding, devastation, loss, suffering and death provide acute points of comparison. Now, before we can get the Word out, we must get the Word straight. Therefore, please listen to the Scripture text for this evening's sermon, Ezekiel 33:7-11, and ponder the answer to God's question,

. . . “Why will you die?”

"So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the House of Israel; whenever you hear a word from My mouth, you shall give them warning from Me. If I say to the wicked, O wicked man, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way; he shall die in his iniquity, but you will have saved your life. And you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, 'Thus have you said: "Our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?"' Say to them, 'As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O House of Israel?'"

Thus far the Word of the LORD our God.

Let's begin the sermon this evening by having the answer to the God's question given right away. Why will you die? There is only one reason why people die eternally. Unbelief, which is not having the God-given gift of faith in Christ as your Redeemer and Savior. There are two, basic reasons why people depart this life in unbelief. First is because the person has never heard that Jesus is the Redeemer and Savior. Second is because the person has heard this Good News, but rejects it.

Consider the people of New Orleans a few days before Hurricane Katrina reached the city. Imagine that there was one person in charge of getting the message out to the people and that one person did not get the word out as he was called to do. What word? It was a two-fold proclamation; namely, the advent warning of a killer storm and the promise of the evacuation to life. That was the “law and gospel” of what was to be proclaimed to the people, but the word doesn't get out to the people. Katrina devastates the city, people die and the messenger is responsible for all those deaths and he will be held accountable. The called messenger, who was authorized and obligated to speak the word to the people, neither warned of the coming death nor told the people of the way to life. People died in unbelief because they did not hear the message. The messenger, however, is and will be held accountable.

Second, now imagine that the messenger did do what he was called, authorized and obligated to do, and that the word of warning and the word of escape were declared. The message went out to the citizens. The storm is approaching and the way to escape the death and destruction is to evacuate the city. In short, if you stay you will die; if you leave you will live. Then that person, the one who heard this death and life message, ignored it; that is, he did not believe the warning and he did not trust in the promise. As a result, he lost his life. But remember, he didn't die because he hadn't heard, and he didn't die because there was no way of escape. He died because of his unbelief. The called messenger did what he was called to do and he is not responsible for those who heard the word and who did not believe it. Such people died because they rejected the message.

In the Old Testament reading from Ezekiel, the warning is not about an approaching hurricane or an impending flood. It is about the end of the world on Judgment Day and applies to those who die the second death, which is the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:14). Compared to that Day, the category 5 Katrina was but a passing wisp in the willows, and the fires in the towering infernos of the Twin Towers were but a momentary flicker of flame, and the flood waters in New Orleans are but damp spot of soil on earth's acre. Though these events may end life for people in this world, they are not

able to touch anyone's soul for eternity. Not only do unbelievers depart this life as a result of such catastrophes, Christians do as well. However, faithful children of God who die as a result of hurricane, terrorist attack, flooding or disease leave this world and enter into Paradise to be with the Lord.

The Lord God asks, "Why will you die, O House of Israel?" This question is directed to the Church, "Why will you die, O congregation?" God does not desire that anyone be lost forever. Why will you die? Only one reason, remember? Unbelief. It may be unbelief because the pastor does not warn with the accusing Law of God and/or does not comfort with the soothing Gospel of the forgiveness of all sins on account of the sin-atoning death of Jesus on the cross and His death-defeating Resurrection from the dead.

The departure from preaching the Word of God in its truth and purity is an American epidemic as pastors continue to exchange their liturgical vestments for cheerleader outfits in order to entice and empower with the songs of manageable law and become the hawkers of this world's fluid morality to impress the Divine. Such hirelings seduce with a conditional gospel, which is not the Gospel. Their messages are often no different than those non-Christian clergy who fail to acknowledge the sin of man and who call for a century of compassion and hope without the sin-atoning Blood of Christ crucified.

Dearly beloved, there surely are lonely congregations in America, and sadly, within the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Local churches are subjected to this sort of pastoral licentiousness and they are left hungering for the Word. Congregations are becoming more and more anemic as the soul cleansing Blood of Jesus, both in sermon and in the Cup, is being withheld from the laity. It is likely that many members of such congregations have no idea what the Good News of salvation is, or what the means of grace convey. And if they, perchance, would cry out the words of our text, "Our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?" well, tragically, the voice of the preacher is all too often silent about Jesus' forgiveness, the Lord's eternal life and God's salvation. Instead the man heals the wound of God's people lightly saying, "'peace, peace' where there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:4) – "Peace through the Law; peace by obedience." While many are lost because of the failure to preach Law and Gospel, the pastor will be held accountable on the Day of Reckoning.

The LORD God asks, "Why will you die, O House of Israel?" This question is directed to the Church, "Why will you die, O congregation?" God does not desire that anyone be lost forever. Rather, He "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, Who gave Himself as a Ransom for all" (1 Timothy 1:4-6). Why will you die? Again, only one reason, unbelief. It may also be unbelief due to the fact that, while the pastor DOES preach the Word of God in its truth and purity, and DOES administer the Sacraments as Christ instituted them, the congregation will not receive the Word, nor stand for the Absolution, nor be catechized in the faith. In such a situation, while many are lost, the pastor will not be held accountable on the Day of Reckoning.

Since, at the beginning of this sermon, we heard what is the answer to God's question, we will proceed to the end by hearing what is not the answer to the God's question, "Why will you die?" Dearly beloved, . . .

. . . You will not die eternally because you are a sinner, for "the saying is sure and worthy of full

acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners” (Titus 1:15).

. . . You will not die eternally because you have sinned, for behold, Jesus is “the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

. . . You will not die eternally because you have not kept even a single one of God’s Ten Commandments as you are required to do and thus you have no righteous of your own, for the Good News is that by Jesus’ “obedience many will be made righteous” (Romans 5:19).

. . . You will not be lost forever because of what you owe God due to your trespasses, because in Baptism the LORD God made us “alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this He set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Colossians 2:13-14).

. . . You will not die eternally because you know that your sins demand a Divine payment, for “we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:1-2).

. . . You will not die eternally because you feel so alone or because uncertainly assaults you, or because you are diseased or face up-coming surgery or treatment, for yea, though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, the LORD is with you (Psalm 23).

. . . You will not die eternally because of the grave that awaits you, for “in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the First Fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:20), and all who have been baptized are baptized into the death of Christ and because Jesus lives you also shall live, and there will be a heavenly reunion of all those of your loved ones who have departed this life in Christ.

. . . You will not suffer the second death and go to Satan’s hell because Christ has conquered hell and defeated the devil; and for you, dear child of God, no one shall take you out of the Lord’s hands (John 10).

. . . You will not die eternally if you die this night or tomorrow or whenever, for Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life and he who believes in Christ; though he dies, yet shall he live; and whosoever lives and believes in Jesus shall never die (John 11:25-26).

In short, “he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned” (Mark 16:16). The only reason anyone is lost is unbelief. “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God -- not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8-10). Faith and love. That is your life in this world, dear Christian. Faith and love. We pray to the Lord that, He would strengthen us through His Word – in faith toward Him and in fervent love toward one another. Thus, having gotten the Word straight, this is the day to get the Word out. “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10).

We have beheld the loss and the hurting and the suffering of our neighbors in Alabama, Mississippi

and Louisiana. The opportunities to help both those within the Church and those without her, are many and you have information on how to help in your bulletins. There are people who are suffering, hurting and in need of the basic necessities of life and daily bread. Many are also crying out for help with their souls. In addition, look at the opportunities to assist our sister congregations in those areas as they try to attend a service just like this one and to help pastors who are trying to lead their congregations in the proclamation of the Word. We can help, and along with the pastors and congregations in the south, we can stand together and make the good confession of Christ crucified and risen to areas of devastation.

This is the Good News of God's love in Christ Jesus and it's not only for you here this evening, but it is also for your loved ones, and for those who still hurt from the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and for those struggling with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. "For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to Him" (Acts 2:39).

You have come here this evening for "A Service of Repentance and Prayer." First is Christian repentance, which consists of two parts – that you are sorry for your sins, and that you look to Christ Jesus for forgiveness. The second part of the service is prayer. Thus, our supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings are to ascend to the LORD for all people, and don't forget, dearly beloved, to pray for yourself. And if your prayer this night is "O LORD God, 'Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like his!'" (Numbers 23:10), then please rest assured that you may do so, and that you may depart in peace, because you are forgiven of all your sins in the Name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

May the peace of God that surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, now and forever. Amen.