

Reason to Rejoice... Even in the Midst of Death

“Truly, truly I say to you, if anyone keeps My Word, he will never see death.” With these words of our Lord, the Jews scoffed at Jesus, believing Him to be a crazy liar. *“Now we know You have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet You say, ‘If anyone keeps My Word, he will never taste death.’ Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? All those great prophets died too? Who do think you are?!”* While we certainly understand how wicked and wrong those folks were, ***are we really any different?*** You have to admit: What they say rings true in our ears, doesn’t it? If only these words were true! How different would things have been this past year if these words were true and we didn’t have to worry about death and dying? How different would your life be if you didn’t have to worry about COVID? How different would our worship life be if COVID wasn’t an issue? Admit it: We ***want*** the words of Jesus to be true, and yet death happens to everyone, not just unbelievers. Death happens, and it hurts. ***If only Christ’s words were true!*** If only we wouldn’t have to experience death. If only we wouldn’t have to taste the bitter taste of death. We may not want to admit it, but we sometimes struggle with the same unbelief that held these wicked Jews captive when death rears its ugly head in our lives.

But did you catch the problem here? Jesus never said that we wouldn’t ***taste*** of death. He said we would never ***see*** death. There is a difference—an ***eternal*** difference. The Jews, doing exactly what Satan did in the Garden so long ago, twist and corrupt the Word of God. Everyone dies. That’s part of the curse after the fall into sin. *“From dust you were made, and to dust you shall return.”* That’s the consequence of sin, and it’s right out of God’s mouth. As soon as conception takes place, the clock starts ticking. No one lives forever. Everyone dies. The stats don’t lie. One out of every one person dies. God Himself tells us that the span of a man’s life will be 70-80 years. Some may live a little longer (by grace), but no one lives forever. Everyone dies. Everyone will taste death.

So...doesn’t this mean that Jesus is wrong? (We would never say that He’s a liar, but maybe He’s not telling the whole truth, right?) Well...how are you looking at this—through man’s sinful (and scared) eyes, or through God’s eyes? Remember: When Lazarus died, Jesus referred to it as simply “sleeping.” The same goes for Jairus’ daughter. *“Why all the commotion? She’s not dead. She’s sleeping.”* And we know how both those stories ended up, don’t we? They had most certainly fallen asleep in death, and Your Lord spoke His life-giving Word and awakened them from their deathly slumber. They ***tasted*** death, but they didn’t ***see*** death. They tasted physical death, the temporary separation of the soul from the body (which all men taste), but they didn’t see/experience eternal death; the death that is total and eternal separation from the Lord of Life. There is a difference—an eternal difference.

Sadly, this is where those biological children of Abraham just didn't get it. The fruit of faith had fallen so far from the tree! Just consider the events recorded for us in the Old Testament lesson for today. God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac; the very son that had been promised to him for all those years. It was from this son that God was going to bring the promised Messiah into the world. And yet...God is now commanding Abraham to put this same son to death?! And the craziest thing of all? Abraham heard and obeyed. He believed God. He trusted God. ***But what exactly did he believe? What did he trust in?***

The writer to the Hebrews tells us in 11:17-19 that Abraham fully believed that God would raise Isaac from the dead. ***Did you catch that?*** We even hear Abraham proclaim this faith when he tells his servants to “*wait here, and we [the boy and I] will go and worship and then we will return.*” Abraham wasn't lying in order to not raise suspicions. **He was telling the truth.** And it's not that Abraham had some blind generic faith that believed that God would do something, but he didn't know what that “something” would be. Rather, it was a very specific, focused faith on God's promise that his offspring that would outnumber the sands of the seashore and the stars in the sky ***would come from Isaac.*** God said it...many time over the course of twenty-five years, and Abraham trusted God. If God told him to kill his son, Abraham fully believed that God would raise him from the dead, because Isaac still had children to bear. God's promise **could not and would not** die with Isaac on that mountaintop. Abraham believed it...and so did Isaac.

The faithful son of this faithful father trusted his father, and more specifically (and importantly) trusted the Word and promise of God that his father had handed down to him and taught him and raised him to believe. At some point the light bulb clicked on for Isaac, and he realized that God did indeed provide the sacrifice, ***and he was it.*** And yet Isaac didn't object or put up a fight or try to flee in order to save his life. He didn't try to strike a bargain or come up with a different plan. Isaac didn't go to that altar kicking and screaming and fighting for his life (a fight he probably would've won, consider he was young and strong and his dad was north of 115 years old). ***Isaac went willingly.*** He wasn't bound up against his will. He ***allowed*** his father to bind his hands and feet. He ***allowed*** his father; yea, even worked with his father in constructing the altar, carrying the wood up that mountain on his own back and then getting himself situated atop that altar, bound up to do his father's (and his Father's) will, confident in the faith of his father that even though he would momentarily taste of death, God would resurrect him. ***He would not see/experience total and eternal death.***

This is why this Old Testament lesson is appointed for this particular Sunday in Lent, just a few short days before Good Friday. Jesus—the promised Son in the flesh—willingly went to the cross to offer Himself as a sacrifice—the all-atoning

sacrifice for the sins of all children of Adam. His Father commanded, and Jesus obeyed. *“Not My will, but Thy will be done.”* This obedient Son carried the wood of His own sacrifice on His own back to that mountaintop. He allowed Himself to be beaten, scourged, and bound to that sacrificial cruciform altar, the nails piercing His flesh and blood as they buried into the wood beneath. And it is on this cross—this bloody altar—that the Son of God momentarily experienced/saw ***true hellish death***, for the just and fiery wrath of God was poured out upon Him in full. He was forsaken by God. And yet...through it all He ***never*** lost faith. Even as He cried out, *“My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?”* God remained His God. And when that sacrifice was complete; when the wage was paid in full for all time, He victoriously cried out, *“It is finished.”* He then ***peacefully and confidently*** commended His Spirit to His Father, and then fell asleep in death.

And yet... *“Today you will be with Me in paradise.”* Those words of promise, spoken to that lowly, undeserving thief, were absolutely true. Though they both tasted death, neither saw death—eternal death—for they both reclined at the heavenly feast in paradise that very afternoon. And three days later, as you well-know, the Lord of Life arose from His Sabbath rest—His deathly slumber—and proved to the world that He ***IS*** the Lord of Life. Death has no dominion over Him! *“All who believe in Me shall never die.”*

My fellow sons and daughter of Abraham; baptized children of God: This is our comfort, our peace, our reason to rejoice, even as we sorrow and grieve and taste of the sinful death that pervades our bodies and the fallen world in which we now reside. We have been baptized into this victory; the victory of the eternal and unchanging “I Am” (as in “before Abraham was, I am.”) There is nothing new under the sun, and that includes God’s gracious and merciful peace. *“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ have been baptized into His death and resurrection? For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His.”* ***Death no longer has dominion over us!***

That’s not always so easy to believe, though, is it? Times get tough and scary and uncertain, and Old Adam’s sinful DNA starts causing us to take our focus off of God’s cruciform baptismal promise. It comes so ***natural*** to us, like our first parents, to flee and hide and try to save ourselves by means of our own fig leaves. Sorry, but stimulus checks and vaccines and masks and gloves and even full-body hazmat suits can’t save you from even one single sin, the wage of which is death—eternal death. We know all this. We (hopefully) even believe it, and yet... things get tough and uncertain and scary and the Old Adam in us begins to doubt and get angry with God—to accuse Him of being a liar—because His workings and His timelines aren’t matching up with our notions of how things are supposed to look, sound, and work. We are by nature, sinful and unclean. *“What*

do you mean ‘taking up a cross’ and following You means I actually have to bear a cross and maybe even suffer a little bit?! That’s not fair!” **No... THAT’S NOT FAIR!** [the crucifix] The innocent Son of God died for you. He died for you so that you can have eternal life and have it in over-flowing abundance. That isn’t fair.

Folks: Our Lord knows our weakness of faith; our Old Adam wicked nature to doubt when things get tough or seem dark. This is why He continually holds out to us ***His escrow; His proof and blessed assurance—His Word and His Sacraments.*** “Where two or three gather in My name, there I am among you.” Do you want present-tense proof of “I Am” with you now in peace? Look no further than right here at the altar/communion rail. “I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Take and eat. Take and drink. This is My body and My blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of all your sin.” Though we may suffer and even taste the bitter taste of death in this world/age, yet we live. We live and we will **never** die, because our death has already been swallowed up and put to death in the blood of Christ; the very lifeblood He nourishes us with here at His holy altar.

As I say every week, ***fear not, for this is exactly what your Lord says it is: His very Body and Blood.*** Hold fast to His Word and Promise. “As often you do this, remember what I have said.” This sacrament—this command and promise of God attached to ordinary humble means—is **exactly** what He says it is. It is forgiveness of sins. It is Life. ***It is Christ, who is incorruptible. There is no death in the Lord of Life!*** I know what man says about these things; what our own Old Adam DNA screams out at as (along with the devil and the world whispering in our ear), but I also know what Christ says. Be at peace... and rejoice, for “It is finished, and I am with you, now and to the end of the age.”

I pray that this Good News takes root in your souls. Come what may, you belong to Christ. Come what may, the Lord of Life reigns victorious. His Word and Sacraments are the proof. May this cruciform Gospel Truth set you free; ***free from all doubt and worry, despair and anger.*** Like your father Abraham, may you, by God’s grace, ever hold fast to the Word and Promise of your God and Lord. May this faithful hearing open your eyes of faith to see your Lord providing and reigning and ruling in your midst; in the very midst of this fallen, dark and shadowy valley of death that we call “life.” May you hear and see, may you hold fast and ***rejoice***, now and into all eternity.

In Christ’s holy name...**AMEN**