

The grace, mercy, and peace of Christ Jesus, our Lord and Saviour be yours this day. The title for today’s sermon is ‘Death to Life’, based on the Epistle lesson from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, chapter two. Let us pray...Amen

So far this year I’ve spent a little time in cemeteries. Have you ever walked through a cemetery, just taking some time to read the head stones and grave markers? When I was younger, cemeteries scared me because there were dead people there. But having matured, both emotionally and spiritually, I am now able to see cemeteries for what they are; the sleeping place of the saints. The root word for cemetery comes from the Latin and Greek for ‘sleeping place’. So now I am able to walk without fear, for the bodies there will be raised, but not in a zombie apocalypse but at the resurrection when Christ returns. Still, I am often intrigued to read the head stones and grave markers, seeing how long each person lived on this earth: some 100+ years, some 80, other 60, or 40, or 20, and sometimes only a few hours. Yet, all were part of some kind of family with people who loved them.

Yet, we still have a healthy fear of death. Death is still the enemy which takes our loved ones from our eyes and ends our life here on earth. Illnesses attacks without an invitation. Most people would love to live for a number more years than they are given. In years past people searched high and low for the ‘Fountain of youth’, yet, as we know it, to no avail. There are an almost endless number of books and movies of people searching for this elusive and hidden water to increase their life expectancy. Even the president and managing partner of Google, Bill Maris, is putting millions of dollars into finding that elusive fountain of youth to increase our life expectancy. He figures humans could live to be 500 years old, but instead of water, using some other technology. People want to try to cheat death and prolong their life. Bill Maris is just another example of someone who is trying to use technology to take the place of religion, putting his hopes in the prospect of a life that isn’t eternal, but is at least really long. But technology can’t take the place religion, which, for all its miracles, is more than impressive magic tricks.

No matter how long a person might try to cheat death, the problem is, death is an unfortunate reality in this world in which we live. Science and technology can help improve some of our living conditions, our medical procedures, and even our quality of life, but those are only temporarily. But in the end, unless Christ returns first, each and every one of us will also die. We can sanitize death, institutionalize death, and even try to keep the general public from seeing it, but people still die every single hour of every single day. We don’t like to be confronted with our mortality, unless it’s in the movies or video games. We don’t like it because death shows us our sin. **“For the wages of sin is death”**, the stopping of the heart and of breathing, permanently.

In today’s world we don’t see death as much as people did in the past. In today’s Old Testament reading, the Nation of Israel saw death all around them. After they cursed God the

people grumbled and turned against Moses. They did that it even after everything else God had done for them through Moses. So God sent fiery serpents to bite the people. Those serpents were the physical embodiment of God’s wrath over sin.

Death is still an ever present reality, only a second away.

But looking at today’s Epistle reading, we heard what our present situation would be if it were not for Christ Jesus. We would be no better off than those complaining Israelites walking around in the wilderness. Yet as God was merciful to the Israelites, He is even more so to us. When they were bitten by a snake, they earned wage for their sins, in death they had only two options: raise their eyes to see God’s promise of salvation, or they could die a very painful death. No magic, no work, just trust in God and His Word of promise of healing. Look up to the sign God gave.

The bronze snake foreshadowed our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, and what He would do for you. Jesus is the One who was nailed to a cross and lifted high up on the cross for us, for our healing, and for our forgiveness and salvation.

It is in this Jesus, the One who was lifted up, that we are brought from death to life: from condemnation to salvation; healed from having been bitten repeatedly by the spiritual serpent of sin and the devil.

Now there are many who still search high and low for the fountain of youth. Many, as mentioned, are willing to spend millions, go through all kinds of trials and adventures, and to even risk life and limb to try to find that precious water, some way to increase their life. Yet God never hid that water from anyone. Instead the fountain which promises eternal life well beyond 500 years, the medicine of immortality, is a gift from God you witnessed again this morning. This gift comes through rather unspectacular ways. No extra work, no searching by our strength and resources: simply by God’s grace through water and the Word. There God takes a child, or adult, from death to live; from being a child or wrath and the devil to being a beloved child of God; from being condemned in their sins to being forgiven of every one; from having to face the surety of death, both temporally and eternally, and given the gift of eternal life.

God often works in what this world considers the most unspectacular ways, yet He does it beautifully.

In the Old Testament reading, the people were called to simply look up at the very thing which was causing them suffering and death. God didn’t hide the means to give them healing and life, instead God instructed Moses to lift it high up so everyone could see it and be healed

who had been bitten and were suffering. So Moses followed God’s instructions and made the bronze serpent, a replica of what was killing them because of their sins, their rejection of God, for their rebellion. There on the pole was life.

And now God, in and through Christ, has given us something far, far better. Since we, as Paul says, **“were dead in the trespasses and sins”**, He had to do something more than just lift a bronze snake up, He had to raise us from or spiritual death, inherited from Adam. We weren’t just sick in our sins and trespasses, we were dead. We couldn’t look up. As is evident in cemeteries, people who are dead don’t do anything, and can’t do anything to change their situation. If something needs to be done, it needs to be done to them and for them. This is exactly what happens in Holy Baptism: God works through water and His Word to breathe life, eternal life, into a dead soul and give eternal life. Paul explains it this way: **“And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”**(Colossians 2:13-14)

God calls us to look in the opposite place than where the world would have us look. God doesn’t tell us to climb mountains or search through valleys, rather He simply tells us to look to the One I’ve already given to you, to Christ Jesus who heals you, to the One who gives you life. For Christ is the One who heals us through His injuries for our sins; who gives us peace through the violence He received; who comforts us through His suffering; and who gives us life through His death and resurrection for each and every one of us.

We don’t need to search for a fountain of youth; we don’t need to spend millions of dollars to try to extend our life because in Christ we will live forever, forgiven and redeemed by our Lord and Saviour. For God so loved the world, for God so loved you, that He sent His only Son to save you. **“God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”**(Ephesians 2:4-10)

And just as that bronze serpent stayed up in the camp so every time anyone was bitten they could be reminded of God’s promise of healing, we too are encouraged by God’s Word to regularly hear His Word of forgiveness and where God continues to freely come to us. God

continues to come to us each time we hear His Word and receive His Sacrament to forgive us our sins, to strengthen our faith, and to lead us to everlasting life. On top of that, Christ comes with His own body and blood, broken and shed for you for the forgiveness of all your sins, remembering who you are: a redeemed and baptized child of our heavenly Father. For in God's Word and Sacrament we are reminded of the Baptismal life we were baptized into and live, the forgiveness God poured out and continues to pour out, our salvation in Christ, and the eternal life God has secured for us through Christ Jesus.

So going back to the cemetery, there too we have the hope of death to life, where God promises we, and all who have died before us will be raised again, because in Christ Jesus through baptism and hearing His Word He has already raised us to eternal life spiritually and promises the same will occur physically at the resurrection on the Last Day. We are saved, we have eternal life. While we may not see it in its entirety right now, it is assured in Christ. You are saved. You have been given eternal life in Christ, not because of anything you have done but because of the wonderful grace and love God so richly pours out on you. For this gift we respond saying: thanks be to God! Amen.

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