

Sermon on John 11:1-44 April 9/10, 2011

God's grace and peace to you from Christ our Lord.

Today we're going to be talking about death. How we look at it, how Scripture looks at it, and what that means for us today in light of our baptism.

Quick show of hands. How many of you have been to a funeral? During my journey on this earth I can count on two hands how many funerals I've been to. This is a fact of life; that death happens. This will be a fact of your life; that you will die. Unless Christ comes again next week, and we do pray that he comes again soon, we are all one day closer to where we too shall join the saints from the church militant to the church triumphant. I recently read about a statistic that said in the next 12 months, in the next year, 56 million people will die, and about 155,000 people die everyday. And the world's population right now is at about 6.7 billion people. So less than a percent of the world's population will succumb to the one of our greatest enemies: Death. In 1 Corinthians 15 the Apostle Paul reminds us that the last enemy to be defeated by Christ is death. Good thing too, because when it comes down to it, there is absolutely nothing we can do about death. It's an unfortunate consequence of being heirs of a fallen humanity that not only refuses to acknowledge who God is and what God commands of us, but we are heirs of a fallen humanity that also refuses to acknowledge that God the Father sent his Son to save us from the unholy trinity; sin, the devil, and death.

Death, for many people, perhaps for many of you, is something totally alien, totally foreign. It happens "out there," in the hospitals, in the nursing homes, in the streets, in other countries...death happens away from us. We're afraid of it. In biblical times, and for the most part up until the advent of modern medicine, that wasn't the case. Death happened a lot. You couldn't hide yourself from it. If you were parents you were probably going to have a lot of children because if you had 10 kids, you could hope that 5-7 of them would survive into adulthood. Child mortality rates were between 30 to 50%. You saw your brother or sister die from this or that disease, your uncle or aunt how got a bad cough one day

and a week later was ready to be buried, you were lucky to have even met and remember your grandparents, and if you were a woman and your husband could support many kids, you had multiple pregnancies to deal with and who knew if one of them was going to claim your life. Today, people are having fewer and fewer kids, because people are living longer and longer because of good medicine, good doctors, nurses, aids, etc. So it's easy to see how differently we look at death when compared to our ancestors or people living in biblical times. Death was all around our ancestors.

Where has it gone for us? It's totally foreign, we try to hide from it. We try and hide from it...interestingly, by glorifying it...(and my apologies if I mention one of your favorite shows) by glorifying it on TV with the 15 different CSI locations there are, shows like Bones and Crossing Jordan, by glorifying it in movies with things like zombies (and sorry for you Twilight fans) and vampires; we don't want to think about death so what do we do...we watch it happen in TV and movies. We don't take death seriously enough, that is, until it's too late. For example, I don't know if any of you have seen "Talledega Nights" with Will Ferrell... "We all have a 98% chance to die."

Let's go back to our text. We read about Jesus coming to his friends' place in Bethany where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus live. Now remember what John wrote about this turn of events. Jesus was a good distance from these friends of his that he loved very much. He was so far away that it would take him a few days to get to Bethany. And what does Jesus do? Does he rush? No. Does he send a letter of condolences to the person who told him that Lazarus was ill? No. He just let's...him..die...Jesus lets Lazarus die. Now why would he do that. The nerve of some people! He turned water into wine, he healed a lame man who couldn't walk, he helped out a woman who was caught in adultery, he fed 5000 people with a few pieces of fish and some bread, he walks on water and calms a storm, he heals a blind man, and this Jesus our Savior couldn't find it important enough to come to Martha and Mary to help

their brother, their brother that Jesus loved? He loved him, dang it, didn't he? Isn't Jesus taking death seriously here? Why did he just dawdle around?

What would you all think about me if you called me saying someone in your family sick and dying and I let you know, "Well, just wait. I know so-and-so is sick and is probably going to die, so whats the rush?" Now Jesus doesn't exactly say those words, but with the actions he conveyed sort of a nonchalant attitude didn't he? Jesus waited until Lazarus was good and dead. "For you sake I'm glad I was not there." he says. Some of the funeral party said the same thing to Jesus. They say, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" (11:37). But Jesus just lets him die. He lets him die. Scripture reminds us that this Lazarus guy is so dead that what...well, he stinks, there is a stench. Remember what Martha and Mary say, they both say the same exact thing: "Lord if only you were here, my brother wouldn't have died." How many of you might have uttered those very words when you were near the side of someone who you loved dieing.

Scripture doesn't glorify death. Scripture calls a spade a spade. Jesus doesn't glorify death either...but he is glorified through it. Jesus doesn't stop death either. He lets it happen. As tough as that may sound. But death, and here is one key fact of Scripture, is not what God wants for his people, for you. Remember what happens when Jesus our Lord comes to the people crying over Lazarus' death? What does he do; he wept too. But these weren't sentimental tears or tears of grief. They were tears of anger and bitter sadness. Verses 33 and 38 say that Jesus was greatly disturbed. This was hardly the case. Jesus was angered...he was livid. Why? Two reasons: (1) Death had claimed a friend he loved and death, you will remember, is our enemy, death is God's enemy. (2) Because of the people's unbelief around him. What had been Jesus been telling these people for so long?

See → John 1:4; 3:14-16; 5:24-28; 6:53-54; 10:10, 27-28; 11:25

Brothers and sisters in Christ. Death is scary. Like many of you, I'm scared to death about death.

Death is real. The pain is real. The sadness, the anger, the bitterness is real. There's no way around that. No amount of TV or cinema can mask that. But God is not afraid of death, nor of rotting corpses like Lazarus. God enters into death himself...we see that with Jesus going to Lazarus' tomb...we see that in Jesus Christ, the God-Man, himself dying and going to the grave. We see that in Jesus Christ entering into you dead lives, into you dead faith, to give you a living and breathing faith that trusts God and what He has promised through His Son.

God invests himself in dead people. And you all have died already in your baptism, as Paul reminds you in Romans 6. It was a spiritual death to be sure, but you nevertheless have been buried with Christ into his death through those waters and through that Word so that you may walk in newness of life, now and in the life to come. And the Christian walk of life is, what Martin Luther calls, the beginning of a blessed death. A life lived that despises one of the greatest enemies, death, and lives the life that only God can give. Will it be easy? As many of you know, no it won't. But be of good cheer, for Christ is the resurrection and the life, and he has promised you life in the midst of death, and life from death. Amen.