

Have you noticed all the euphemisms we as a culture have for death? Reading the obituaries, we see that people pass away, depart this life, go to be with the Lord, pass from this world, go home to Jesus and leave the world behind, but have you noticed that few just outright die? This is ironic because we seem to have an almost insatiable appetite for graphic images of violence and death in our TV shows, movies, video games and news, yet find it hard to face the certain, real, bodily death which every single one of us will face at the end of our earthly lives. That's because real death – our own and those of people we love is intimate; it comes with suffering, with pain, with separation, with loneliness, with anger, with depression, with fear that we cannot make it, or don't want to make it, without our loved one. To say that someone we love *dies* is to say that he or she is gone from us for the remainder of our days on earth. And that hurts - stunningly, deeply, sometimes irreparably.

Mary was filled with grief and maybe some righteous anger, too, when she came to find Jesus. Her brother, Lazarus, had died and Jesus, who was Lazarus' good friend, hadn't been there to prevent his death. Mary was crying. Lazarus' friends were crying. Jesus cried, too, out of a sense of loss, for he had loved Lazarus as a brother. He cried out of a sense of anger and frustration at the suffering that Lazarus' friends and family were going through. Jesus knew the pain of death, the way it shakes us loose from our moorings, destroys our plans for the future, redefines who we are in the world. Jesus knew the messiness of death, its cruelty and even its stench.

So, when Jesus ordered the stone to be removed from Lazarus' tomb, when he shouted

for Lazarus to come out, when Lazarus came out of the tomb in obedience to Jesus' words, Jesus showed his power over death – not just the death of his friend, but death as destroyer of all human life. The setting of a tomb, the tears of mourners, the stone in front of the grave that would be rolled away – all were previews of what was to come. For when Jesus' tomb was found empty, God was telling the world that his Son has the power to, as Isaiah put it, “swallow up death forever.”

Jesus' tears at the death of his friend become a river of living water. In that water, we are baptized into Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Our baptismal service has a wonderful section that is nicknamed “Luther's flood prayer.” In it, we hear that in the beginning, the Spirit moved over the waters and created the world. Through the waters of the flood, God delivered Noah his family; through the sea God led Israel from slavery into freedom. God's Son was baptized at the river by John and anointed with the Holy Spirit. When we are washed in Jesus' living water, we are set free from the power of sin and death and raised up to live with God. In the water that springs from our Savior's sorrow, creation happens. In that water, our hearts are washed clean, we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. We are promised that Jesus will be with us all the days of our lives on earth and that Jesus will take us through the gates of death when we die, where we will be joined with the believers of every time and place. In the book of Romans, Paul writes, “Do you not know that all those who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead

by the power of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”

For us, newness of life has two dimensions. First is the assurance we receive through baptism that when we die, we will live with God forever. In that new life, we will be reunited with those we have loved and who died before us. We will take our place at a great table, a spread more lavish than even our greatest Thanksgiving remembrance.

Also around the table will be people we never in a million years would have expected to see there. In that place, we will all sit down to a sumptuous feast, a banquet of rich, delicious foods and flowing wine - not cheap table wine, but the finest wine we have ever tasted. We will be astounded that no one is crying there, that mourning and pain and death will have vanished. For Jesus, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end of all life on earth and in heaven, will have completed the job he came to earth to do – to welcome all people into his and their eternal home.

New life in Christ has another meaning. At the end of our baptismal service, the congregation welcomes the newly baptized by saying together, “We welcome you into the body of Christ and into the mission we share: join us in giving thanks and praise to God and bearing God's creative and redeeming word to all the world.” When we stand and say those words, it is not as unscathed disciples of Christ. We stand as those broken by the world, sad and suffering. At times, we stand bearing the grief of death, mourning and crying tears of pain and loss. When we welcome another into a life of service, we may wonder how we are going to summon the strength to serve God ourselves. And then we see him, standing with us. He who has also been broken by the world is right

here where we are. He suffers with us. He bears the pain of death. He cries with us.

This man, this Son of God, is our strength to persevere through the darkness and the pain. He is the well from whom we draw light and life. He is the one in whose hands we place our lives and who welcomes us with open arms when we die.

Our risen Lord breaks into our world as a mighty river, moving us through this life and into the life to come. Today, on All Saints' day, we name before God those whom we have lost, those whose deaths have left holes in our lives, some of them still gaping and raw. We turn our loved ones over to God's promise of the life to come. When we are ready, we return to the life God has made for us. Some will return to life as it looked before their loved ones died. Some will find their lives totally rearranged so they may discover a whole new way of serving God and others.

Though it may be the hardest thing we have ever done, we honor God and those we have loved by continuing to be bearers of God's love and hope. As Gerhard Frost writes in his poem, *Going On*, "We honor those who have taught us before parting to face forward by going on." Never forgetting, sometimes still aching from the pain of loss, we go on, holding one another up, sharing our own pain as a gift to those still grieving. For that is what Jesus has done for us and will continue to do. Until one day when we all rejoice together in the place where God wipes the tears from all faces, where death is no more, where mourning and crying and pain are no more, where no one will ever die again.

Amen.

*All Saints' Day 2015 November 1, 2015 Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish John 11:32-44*