

“We are Alive!”

II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

St. Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians is excited that “today is the day of salvation!” In spite of all of his afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, sleepless nights, hunger, and thought to be dead – “we are alive!” “We are punished and yet not killed. We are alive!”

For those Christians who tune into those T.V. preachers preaching a prosperity gospel – if you have a strong enough faith God will bless you with prosperity – have not read St. Paul’s writings in our New Testament. Paul would say the stronger your faith, the more you will suffer and just be happy to be alive.

“I don’t want to die!” Most of us have spoken those words or at least thought them. We think them in the midst of war, sick in a hospital bed, or as our car spins out of control on an icy road.

The 40 days of Lent are the church’s experience of learning to die. Drawn into the life of Jesus over the next 6 weeks, we move toward his suffering and death. We come face to face with our own dying when we come forward on Ash Wednesday for the imposition of ashes and hear the words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” The passion hymn, “Go to Dark Gethsemane” includes a prayer that we may “learn from Jesus Christ to die.”

If you’ve ever been on the storm-tossed waters of a lake or ocean you’ve been

reminded that we are never very far from dying. The baptismal liturgy draws upon that life-and-death imagery to declare that in baptism we die and rise with Christ.

St. Paul writes in Romans 6:3-4 - “Do you not know that all of us 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 glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” Paul says we’ve already died and risen with Christ in baptism.

If we take God’s promise at face value, that we died in those baptismal waters and miraculously rose to new life, then, in a very real sense, our death is behind us. Death is an event of our past. Usually we view death as a threat of the future. We will die one day, whether we talk about it or not, whether we prepare for it or not, death will get us. But Jesus reverses that thinking, saying to us, “because you have died and risen with me, life is what you have before you. You have life now, full and abundant life, even eternal life, life forever.” We are alive!

We want to live, really live. We don’t want death doing it’s nasty number on us. If Jesus can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves – defeat death – then we need to pay attention during this 40 day Lenten journey.

Let’s take this another step. If death is behind me rather than ahead, Jesus has made it so. He has made my future secure and full of life. My destiny is tied to the one who has risen from the dead.

Jim Linn knew his destiny was tied to the one who has risen from the dead when he came home from Parma Hospital on Monday night, ate a bowl of moose track ice cream, visited with his family, and when they went into the next room to let him rest, he very consciously took off his oxygen, carefully hung it next to his bed, and chose to make the journey to his eternal home because he knew his destiny was tied to the one who has risen from the dead.

St. Paul wrote to the Colossians, “You have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.” We are alive in Christ!

Let’s take one more step. If my life is “hidden with Christ in God,” my life is secure. Death does not have the power to snatch us from God. In the earliest writing on baptism in the church, around 200 A.D., the church father Tertullian wrote that Christians are like little fish, safe in the waters of our baptism. We are safe because God connected us to the Risen Christ in those waters to give us life. We are alive!

The effect of this is powerful. We can learn from Jesus Christ to die. We can learn how to die. Christians can look at death with the confidence that it doesn’t own us. This realization has the power to free us. In the 1940’s German pastor and teacher Dietrich Bonhoeffer found himself in increasingly grave danger as he tried to live faithfully to Christ in Nazi Germany. Instead of acting out of fear, he decided – and this is my paraphrase – that faithful people don’t ask how they’re going to save their own skin, but, rather, how the next generation is going to live. With death already behind him,

Bonhoeffer lived boldly and confidently. Though he die physically, in Christ he would still be alive. On April 9, 1945, on a Nazi gallows, he declared, “For me this is not the end, but the beginning.” We are alive!

I will never forget a woman who struggled courageously with cancer for a couple of years. The battle was an emotional roller coaster, but she kept living. Finally death grabbed her and just wouldn’t let go. When we gathered around her in her home, with tears her family told stories and shared the intimacies of a loving family. They filled their house with the laughter that baffles death and the devil.

“What would we do without faith?” she said to me. I didn’t have to answer because it was not a question. She was living and she was also learning to die. She could do both, because, held by God in the embrace of Christ, she was safe in the waters of her baptism. She was alive!

Jesus struggled on Maundy Thursday night in the Garden of Gethsemane with his own death on the cross. He knelt down and prayed, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.”

Learning to die has many dimensions. For Jesus there was coming to terms with the will of God and there was self-sacrifice. There is letting go and there is change. On Ash Wednesday we think about all of these things as we come forward and hear the words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Jesus Christ will teach how to die on this 40 day journey to the cross.

Jesus will lead us back to the font and remind us, “Remember how I held you and brought you through these waters from death to life. Learn from me.”

In the end, we may arrive at the calm of Jim Linn or Bonhoeffer or the confidence of the woman with cancer, or we may be neither calm nor confident. What will matter is that we have Christ with whom we are safe in the waters. We are alive!

#347 - Go to Dark Gethsemane