

The Fourth Sunday in Lent – 2020

Isaiah 42:14-21

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41

It appears as though the Christian church has forgotten how to look at death. Because of this self-inflicted amnesia we have grown weaker, and by extension, have not lent the strength that is in us to society at large. This is a moment we will not have back. What are we to be?

How many of y'all have been listening to the news lately? How much? What is the ratio of the amount of time listening to the news versus how much time you are listening to God in His Word? Do you think that that has had an effect on you? Does the news strengthen your faith? Do you believe that God's Word has a bracing effect on people who are in distress? Do you think that the Word of God is simply emotional helium, a temporary jolt of "feel good" ideas that relieve stress for a time and give us a Little Orphan Annie optimism? "The sun will come out... tomorrow." How many of y'all believe that God's Word gives us more than that?

The Christian church has forgotten how to look at death. I remember it like it was yesterday. I was twenty-six years old, lying in my bed in a wonderful townhouse apartment in Escondido. Out of nowhere, my heart began to do something that it had never done, began to do something that hearts aren't supposed to do. What was my reaction? Wide-eyed panic. I awakened the restful beauty next to me and rattled her with my radical alarm. Thirty years ago... have I changed since then? Yepper-depper-do. Do you know what has changed me?

Kathy Beliew's funeral. Don Deen's funeral. Andrea Hinkleman's funeral. David Paulus' funeral. Frieda Schoon's funeral. Art Anderson's funeral. John Waltermeyer's funeral. Bob Pickering's funeral. Do you know what has changed me? Gordon Jones' funeral. Bill Bracy's funeral. Ken Anderson's funeral. Pastor Paulus' funeral. I've been changed. Do you know what has changed me? Ted Hanson's funeral. Ken Haarala, Dale Burns, Ed Albanese, Michelle David, Bob Schoff and Delores Winsor – George Garner, Brian Waller, Norma Bracy and Jeane Prill – Betty Carlton, Victoria Shapiro, Darlene Siefkes, and Norma Bracy – I've been changed. God changed me. Do you know what is preached at a funeral? The resurrection. The resurrection has changed me. The resurrection has changed you; it is time for you to remember.

Death came into this world and immediately behaved like a bully, like a dead eyed shark against a soft skinned teenage girl in deep water, like a Philistine giant against a diminutive shepherd. On earth is not death's equal. Disease and famine, war and pestilence, tempest of wave and wind and fire – death is a beast, a felon, a tyrant. Sin is at the heart of this evil. You are a man of unclean lips and you live among a people of unclean lips. Sin is in your person, in your neighbor, in your community, your world. You covet, you gossip, you lust and you put yourself above God. You want others to serve you, you return hate for hate, you use alcohol to please yourself, you fail to forgive when God moves your spirit to do so, you can't call up a genuinely sacrificial spirit within you because you have not practiced the art of sacrifice in small things. You defy God and His Word because you want to live your life your way.

You have a radical problem. Sin is a huge problem. A sober examination of your state is what God calls you to. He genuinely wants you to see the truth – all of it. The Lord Christ came into this world for you. Not for a photo-op, not for half-measures, not for partial answers or for a temporary fix. He came to subject Himself to sin, to suffer death, to transform you and take you out of this catastrophe that is a broken creation and bring you to heaven. In your flesh, the Son of God came to contend for you, for your neighbor, your community, your world. Contend! In a radical contest, Jesus lived in this broken world as the superlative man! God living beneath the law of God, for one reason... to save you. He was magnificent... as a man. Holy, just, loving (God Himself living in our ugly streets, refraining from selfish ticks, giving Himself to others). Every day a perfect man. Every situation a perfect man. Every act a perfect man. In every moment He loved God above all things and He loved His neighbor as Himself.

He taught of His kingdom. He revealed His Father. He embodied grace. And He was crucified. No one takes my life from me but I lay it down of my own accord. He is mocked, abused, whipped and pierced. Naked, hanging on the cross, He prays for His tormenters. He calls out to His Father for their forgiveness. Blood streams from His holy body because the price for sin is a divine price and only Christ could pay. It is finished! Death is met. Death is confronted. Death is cornered and pinned and defeated. God died on this earth – has that been in the news? Christ's body was given into death so that you might live. It is finished indeed. That is how you look at death, yours and everyone else's, through the cross of Christ and His pierced flesh.

Resurrection! That is how the church lives her life. That is the life you possess. That is the reality that no plague can undo. Resurrection. A wounded but undefeated King strides out of His garden tomb. Life is the victor. You are a child of the resurrection. The air of heaven is already in your lungs. You have forgotten. This world is a prelude. Heaven is your home. Death is constantly all around us, buzzing with its vain threats. We are immune. The serpent's head is crushed beneath a nail-pierced foot. Jesus brings His triumph to bear on you that you may not be bullied by death and its petty threats. Soldiers have died with this promise in their hearts and they have died bravely. Martyrs have this Easter reality imbedded in their minds and they have faced their grim end with heaven's courage. That blood is to run in our veins. Mindful of the call to preserve life, mindful of the moment in which we stand to be prudent and not endanger our loved ones, our neighbors, our friends – but also knowing who is the Lord of life and who holds our lives in His hands. We walk as children of light, children of the resurrection, children of Christ the King. That is the strength our community needs; lend it.

The blessed Lord Jesus has taken away your sin. You have been transformed. You were washed in His blood in Holy Baptism and you are an heir of heaven. His sacrificial Spirit lives in you. He leads this congregation in Triumphant Procession and through us is spreading the fragrance of the resurrection. That aroma is to permeate our community during this crisis. The aroma of Christ will be a profound blessing to those who come across you. Christians are to lend their strength to our nation. It is we who know how to look at death aright, know how to look at death through Easter eyes (not as an afterthought but with every fiber of our being). Mere days ago, one of our communion was taken home. Barbara Larrabee; she was eager for Christ's embrace. I want to be with Jesus. She died well. She knew how to look at death, how to see life, how to see the Lord of life. Her funeral will change me further; further into God's grace, further into the truth of the resurrection, further into life now with Christ. May we all be changed further.