

Ash Wednesday – 2021

This is a dark night. The sun splashed afternoon and the warm temperatures of the day belie the gravity of this solemn observance. To be sure, this is a dark night. A funeral pall hangs over this holy house. There is a reality that we all face tonight – not because we want to but because we must. Remember, O man, that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return.

Joseph Louis Barrow reigned as the heavyweight boxing champion from 1937 to 1949. During that time, he was indomitable in the ring. His opponents knew it. Joe Louis knew that his opponents knew it. He coined a phrase that you know quite well. Referring to one of his upcoming opponents Joe said: “He can run, but he can’t hide.” The largest boxing ring is twenty feet on each of four sides – a square. Two men (besides the referee) are inside the ropes. Joe Louis was known as the Brown Bomber. During a bout, he hunted his opponent, an unequal match. The opponent could run, but he couldn’t hide. Once in the ring, there was no evacuation, no exit, no egress, no escape.

You are in the ring. Your opponent is death. Sin has brought this grave opponent upon you; your sin. There is no place to hide. You are exposed, vulnerable, hunted. Death is well-equipped; its weapons are exacting, its movements are merciless, and it prowls around the ring of life, the ring of this world with everyone in its sights. Everyone! You are overmatched! You can run, but you cannot hide.

The word is out on the streets. Death does not mask itself in sheep’s clothing. It is loose and the news speaks of its conquests with unrelenting constancy. A virus originating in China has changed life dramatically. A winter storm has 27 states in its grip and life is imperiled. Cancer and heart disease run rampant. Astronomical abortion figures. Obituaries, and morticians, and cemeteries – death is an industry, an unwelcome backseat rider on our tandem bicycles, a shadowy reflection we see in the mirror of our soul. You can run, but you cannot hide.

Plenty run. Like chickens with their heads cut off – people are running. Unbelief is just people trying to run. Unbelievers, even they know that there is no place to hide. Self-deluded, they don’t hide behind the oak tree or in the Rhododendrons, but they hide in front of the tele, they hide in a bottle of booze or in Nordstrom or on a cruise ship or in their wardrobe or on their filthy websites or in their fancy political correctness. Running and hiding; Adam ran and hid beneath his fig leaves. David ran and hid in the arms of Bathsheba. Judas ran and hid with a rope around his neck. Some attempt to use theology to ramp up their hiding game. Mormons are trying to hide. Muslims are trying to hide. The works righteous are trying to hide. Atheists, despite all their protests, are doing nothing more than trying to hide. Guilt and death and a cold verdict are not subject to such juvenile games. Remember, O man, that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return.

There is something unique about you, something rare and vital and worth noting on this solemn evening. You are here voluntarily – not because you must but because you want to – in order to hear a word of judgment placed into your ears. That is worth noting. You voluntarily lump yourself with Adam the rebellious, with Thomas the doubter, with Peter the denier and with David the adulterer and murderer. In this place you are most assuredly before God. In this place

you do not run and you do not hide. In this place you have learned to say: “I, a poor miserable sinner” and to say it without pretense, without deception, without guile. Death hunts you and you say that it is just, for you have sinned against God and against heaven. You know that you are a prodigal son, a prodigal daughter. The woman who reached out her hand and took some of the fruit that she was commanded not eat, that woman is your mother. The man who blamed his wife for his own sin, who implicated the one he was charged to protect, that man is your father. You are a man of unclean lips and you live among a people of unclean lips.

There is something unique about you, something rare and vital and worth noting on this grim evening. You are here voluntarily – not because you have been forced by some religious dictum but because there is no other place for you to be on this dark night. Grace has brought you into the open. God’s grace in Christ. You know what He has done for you. The Son of God took upon Himself our flesh in order to allow sin and death to hunt Him. Your sin; your death hunted Him. He neither ran nor hid. God’s grace was incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. He has brought you out into the open. He is your holy substitute, the One true man who came into the ring that death might pummel Him. He is humanity reduced to One. Upon the cross His grace, His love, and His blood flowed in a three-part melody of redemption. That song of salvation has reached your ear and created the faith that brings you out into the open. In truth, that day – Good Friday – was the grimmest day there has ever been and the most wondrous. The cold verdict you deserve was spoken over Him. Crucify, crucify him. And the Father said, “Amen, so shall it be.” The pall of death hung over this sacrifice. There was something unique, truly unique, about Him.

When the temple guard came to arrest Jesus, He went out to meet them and it was He, not they, who was in charge of the interaction. The divine irony is that Jesus was hunting death, determined to render it powerless. No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. In the Garden of Gethsemane, at His arrest, He told Peter: “Put your sword back in its place. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matthew 26:52-53). Coordinating with the Father, Jesus was hunting death. Before Pontius Pilate, the governor implored Jesus to plead for His life. “Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” (John 19:10). “Jesus answered him, ‘You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above’” (John 19:11). You are here tonight, in this house of grace, because our Lord took the sting out of death, rendering it an empty husk, and you are determined to run to Him in this life. That is what is unique about you, that is what is blessed and true about you and allows you to hear the words you voluntarily hear this night and still have hope.

Remember, O man, that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return. We don’t run and hide. Grace replaces that futile exercise with faith. We stand on the historical ground of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Beneath this dark night is a light that cannot be extinguished. It gives us hope and direction and courage. Our Lord is risen and we are the forgiven people of Christ the King. His light has been made to shine in our hearts (2 Corinthians 4:1-7). We are the baptized children of God. In Holy Baptism we died, and our life is hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3). That is the truth that God has revealed in His Son. That is the truth that God has revealed in His Holy Word. That is the truth that God has revealed on this blessed night, in this blessed church, in this blessed service. Even now, God is forming you into the image of His beloved

Son. With the whole church throughout the world, we journey with Him through Lent toward the twin destinations of His cross at Calvary and His empty tomb on a Sunday morning in April. What a blessed journey this will be. And so, let the word be out in our streets, by way of our mouths: Life, not death, is the Victor. The Lord Christ has vanquished sin and death. Our lives are hidden in Him.