

The End of Your Life has Another Ending

20th Sun. after Pentecost – 10/15/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Isaiah 25:6-9 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 8, “**He**, (i.e. “**Yahweh of armies**” from v.6) **will swallow up death forever...**”

Introduction

✘ Joan Aleshire wrote a poem entitled “The Dead” in which she wrote:

In poems I read, “the dead” always appear
As collective noun: gray mass without feature,
To be feared or made fun of, and so to be
Erased, as if we hadn’t once loved or fought
With them, as if we won’t end the same.

(Joan Aleshire, *Litany of Thanks: A Collection of Poems*, New England: Four Way Books, © 2003)

I. Death Wins.

✘ Those words, however a person may interpret them, ultimately stir up a bit of sadness – maybe even despair as we think about the purpose and the length of our time here on earth.

→ They leave us with unsettled doubts about our legacy; about the meaning of our life’s story.

✘ It’s a story that is familiar to us all because we are all part of it and participate in it. It’s the story of an ordinary human being who is born into this world to loving parents in a warm home – or maybe not, as the case may be. Either way, here we are. We go to school, learn a few things about the world, make some friends – maybe a few enemies along the way, fall in love once – maybe twice; maybe thrice. If we’re lucky we find a job that we like, where people respect us. If not, then we bounce from job to job or work like a dog at something we can’t wait will end one day. After a while, as we grow older and older, we face retirement. Maybe we’re blessed with grandkids that we get to see every once in a while. But in the end, most of us will probably spend those last years pretty much alone. Eventually we get sick and die. And not many years later, most everyone has forgotten us; no matter who we may have been.

→ Summed up like that, no wonder Joan Aleshire observed that in poems “the dead always appear as collective noun: gray mass without feature.” And to be truthful, that is our “collective story,” so to speak. This earthly life is, in a sense, a tragedy, because while the story might start out in joyful birth, it ends in sorrow – like all real tragedies do. As God told Adam back in Genesis 3:19 after he and Eve had disobeyed God’s one and only command to leave the fruit of only one of the countless trees in the garden alone, “For you are dust and to dust you shall return”.

→ This is the ending about which the poets write and against which we all struggle; feverishly trying and hoping to deny and delay it as long as we possibly can. Dylan Thomas wrote, “Do not go gentle into that good night. Old age should burn and rave at close of day; Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

✘ That’s exactly what many of us do, isn’t it? We rage against death! Unless it’s October of course, as it is now, when the world inexplicably romanticizes and “cute-ifies” death by decorating their lawns and homes with skeletons and tombstones and devils; even dressing up as witches and zombies and ghosts – saying that all of these things which God warns us against in the Bible are just being done somehow “in fun”.

→ But death and everything connected to death, my dear Christians, is not “fun” or pleasing in God’s eyes ever! And either “cute-ifying” it or raging against it will never do us any good, because in the end, death will have its way with us.

- As Joan Aleshire said, we fear “the dead” and maybe make fun of them and try to erase them “as if we hadn’t once loved or fought with them, *as if we won’t end the same.*” But deep down, we know we will end the same.
- ⊗ So, what are we to do in the meantime? The Preacher of the book of Ecclesiastes advises that it is “Better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting because that is the end of all mankind, and the living puts this in his heart” (Eccl. 7:2 LSB).
- That’s an important bit of advice from God’s Word right there – that we all ought to “take our death to heart.” In fact, taking our eventual death seriously, rather than celebrating it with a holiday as Halloween or The Day of the Dead does, or trying to deny that it’s ever going to come as even more people do, does bring us “to the house of mourning” as Ecclesiastes suggests we all should do.
- ⊗ And what’s the value of contemplating our impending doom in death? I mean, if death is our destiny, and that’s the end of the story, then why think about it; why talk about it; why dwell on it if we don’t have to? Why not deny it until the very end and live life accordingly?
- I must admit that sometimes, even as a pastor, when death gets real up close and personal, that strategy sure seems tempting, because death at its worst can leave me speechless. At those times no eloquent words of a poet come from this poor mouth! No captivating story brings help or comfort when I’m sitting in the emergency room with a sobbing woman who’s just given birth to her lifeless child, or when a thirty-five-year-old tells me she just wants to die so that she can stop the misery of this earthly life of depression, or when a father and child have dropped to their knees in grief because their wife and mother has just been taken by death in an accident.
- ⊗ In these moments, death can make any words from my mouth seem inadequate and inappropriate – not up to the task of dealing with the remorseless adversary. Faced with a merciless beast and a story that repeats itself over and over, day after day, it can sometimes seem like it would be easier for us to spend our time and energy in more positive and fruitful ways. “After all,” it’s easy to tell ourselves, “there’s really nothing we can do about death.”
- “It’s better to just leave people alone in the face of impending death or in those initial stages of grief”, many people think, “because eventually they’re going to have to learn to cope with their losses on their own.”
- All kinds of popular platitudes have been thrown around to make our avoidance of dealing with death seem warranted: “Time heals all wounds”. “Yes, death colors all our days, but it’s a fact of life”. “The healthiest thing is to invest in the living and in life.” And perhaps the worst saying of all, “Death is just a part of life.”
- ⊗ But do you see the problem with all of this? In the end, these strategies still come down to death winning the victory! Because death is such an awesome foe, the poets twist and tweak and twirl their pens into poems – all in a fruitless attempt at coming to terms with the relentless march of the beast. Death, in whom there is no remorse, no compassion, no forgiveness, wants nothing more than to leave us *speechless*; unable to respond; unable to answer. Its goal is to crush us with grief and turn any and every joy we might think we have into tragedy. And in that way, death wins! Death gets the glory!

II. A different story by a different poet.

- ⊗ Except that today in our Old Testament Reading we are confronted by the word of a different poet, God’s prophet Isaiah.
- He comes to us with an entirely different poem, placing before our eyes, hearts and minds a very different story. In his poem, death does not have the last word! Death does not get the

glory! In his poem, “Yahweh of armies” as we learned last week “the LORD of hosts” literally means in the original Hebrew – He comes on to the stage of this earthly life with the entirety of His myriads; with all of His armed angels and He “swallows up” – now there’s an awesome image for you – “He swallows up...the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations.” Yes, “He swallows up death forever”, verses 7 and 8 declare much to our comfort; much to our rejoicing.

→ What a wonderful image Isaiah gives us of the absolute reality of Yahweh; of our God’s power and compassion for us sinners who deserve nothing but the despair and hopelessness of eternal death in the horrors of eternal destruction. When you are ravenous with hunger and a plate of food is finally placed in front of you, this is when you “swallow it all up” with minimal bites; with as little chewing as possible, right? The point is that the plate is empty; that which has been “swallowed up” has been completely devoured. So it is that Isaiah conveys God’s promise in verse seven, “He will swallow up on this mountain”, that is on Mount Zion where the Temple is yes, but also where Mt. Calvary is at – just outside the Temple walls. It is there that Yahweh promised to “swallow up” and remove once and for all, the grief and despair; the pain and suffering; the fear and the curse of death “forever”!

III. This is the story of Jesus

⊗ Oh man, just think of what that means to you and me and all people regarding the story of our lives. It means the story has changed entirely, right? It means that death does not have the final word after all; that death actually has a conqueror who adds a final – and a very different chapter to our story.

→ Unlike other poets who contemplate and wrangle with the reality of death and invite all of us to “take it to heart” and just accept it as the final end to our story, this Isaiah guy, he describes the hope that all of us really harbor deep down and long for: the death of death! This poet, Isaiah does not deal with death as if it is the end. Instead, he holds out the hope of a resurrection and the joy of life that never ever ends!

⊗ So, what’s the story behind his poem? Well, we find out in the rest of God’s Holy and perfect Word that this is, in fact, the story of Jesus; the One who is Yahweh God in the flesh; who was born into this world, grew up in it, and was killed at the hands of those who would not listen to the story that He came to tell, first to His kinsman, the people of Israel, and then to all of mankind.

→ But that wasn’t the end of the story, was it? This Son of God, you might say, rewrote the book! Yes, He died and was buried, but His story didn’t end up with the grave! He got up from the grave! He “swallowed up” death by tearing a giant hole in the shroud that covers us. His life story has a very different ending. And it opens up the possibility for every one of us that death may not inevitably have the final word in our lives. If Jesus conquered death; if He is in fact, the fulfillment of this poem, then perhaps I can conquer death too. ... But no, that’s crazy, right? People don’t rise from the dead. My life experience shows me that.

⊗ And yet, Isaiah says in verse eight that this victory over death is for “all the earth” – the shroud that covers “all peoples” is destroyed. So, could this be my story too? Am I – are you included in this promise of victory over death? Indeed you are, and this is your sign that God has favored you so: your Baptism! As Paul tells us in Romans, chapter six, there in that washing with water and Word, you have been crucified and raised with Christ! It’s there that the victory Christ claimed in His resurrection is given to you. It’s there that you are brought to the mountain where Yahweh swallows up death forever.

→ Yes, baptism is that kind of “mountaintop experience,” where Jesus, the Word, becomes God’s Word of life for you and your life’s story has been given a very different and glorious ending!

Conclusion

- ⌘ After Jesus comforted Martha with the assurance of her brother, Lazarus' resurrection He asked her a question that applies to you and me today: "Do you believe this?" (Jn. 11:26)
 - ➔ So friends, do you believe Isaiah's promise from Yahweh to you today? It is unbelievable, isn't it? But it is true, and it is your reality as a believer in Christ. In Baptism, Christ has made each of you part of an entirely different story than what the world and death and your own senses want to make you think you should believe. You have been "born again"; given a new life; a new family; a new Father; a new inheritance! Baptism changes your destiny; it gives you back your voice in the face of death.
 - ➔ So, whenever death threatens to silence you, just say, "Wait a minute! I've been baptized. That's my story;" a story written in the blood of Jesus and sealed with His resurrection to life; a story that cannot be changed because Yahweh Himself has written your name in His eternal "book of life" (Rev. 21:27).
- ⌘ Yes, for now, we live in this world shrouded in death. This is a world cast in shadows that touch each one of our hearts and lives. But as God's resurrected people we are not helpless; we do not despair in the face of death as those around us do.
 - ➔ For we have been baptized. And no matter how powerful death may seem to be, our Baptism tells us otherwise. Jesus sings the final stanza in our song, and it is a word; a song of resurrection! As Isaiah says, "let us be glad and rejoice in His salvation" (v.9). "Yahweh has spoken," (v.8) and in Him we say, "Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!" Amen.