

## **Even so in Christ shall all be made alive**

Psalm 51:1-17; Luke 11:33-44

The news has put me in a dark state of mind – more shocking police brutality against the African American community with the shootings of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling, more suicide bombings in Medina and Baghdad, the assassination of 5 police officers in Dallas and even conflict between the LGBTQ2 and Black Lives Matter justice communities.

While we enjoy the lazy heat of summer, violence and sin sneak in like a snake in the garden. So, why not preach a Lenten summertime sermon on sin and death and resurrection?

I saw this on a friend's facebook feed: "The violence is not new, it's the cameras that are new." I know it's not a popular concept in liberal circles these days, but all of this confirms for me the **reality of original sin** and our collective and individual need for repentance and grace. Saying that these violent deaths are "tragic" doesn't quite cut it. Psalm 51 says: "My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart." Lord have mercy.

The first death in the Bible is a murder - the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel's parents, knew from their rebellion against God that the consequence of their sin was inevitable death for all future generations, but they had yet to experience death in reality.

According to Jewish folklore, Adam and Eve sat grieving over the body of their dead son and didn't know what to do with his corpse. Then they spotted a raven scratching at the ground in order to bury one of its own and this is how they learned about burial! This story also appears in the Quran, but in the Quran, the raven appears to Cain, not Adam and Eve.

Coming into contact with a dead body in many cultures means that one becomes ritually impure, as if death itself is contagious. For example, in traditional Navajo culture, the dead are rarely spoken of and people sometimes abandon homes wherein a death has taken place. Community members who come into contact with the corpse, are subject to a 4-day period of mourning and they must be purified before resuming their everyday lives. There is a sense that the spirit of the

deceased is still present for a time and that contact with this lingering spirit can cause all manner of misfortune (Jerrold E. Levy).

The Israelites also had rituals concerning death pollution.

Numbers 19:11-13 reads:

*Whoever touches a dead body is ritually unclean for seven days. He must get himself purified with the water of ritual purification on the third day and on the seventh day, and then he is clean...Anyone who touches a dead person...and does not purify himself, defiles the Tabernacle of the Lord; he is to be cut off from Israel.*

In Judaism, one of the ritual purifications is taking the Mikvah bath. All clothing and jewelry and even loose strands of hair must be removed from the body and the body must be washed physically clean before it can be ritually cleansed in the Mikvah bath.

Coming into contact with death makes a person and by proximity a person's community polluted. And one must receive the appropriate ritual purification in order to be reintegrated into society.

In 1907, a French sociologist named Robert Hertz published a book called *Death and the Right Hand* about the death rites of the Dayak tribe of Borneo in Southeast Asia. He observed that the body of a deceased person was given a temporary burial before its final burial while its soul waited to enter the land of the dead.

Hertz also noticed that during this waiting period before the final interment of the body, the living relatives were separated from the community until the final burial of the deceased when the mourners' ritual impurity was over. He argued that this separation of the mourners from their community was a necessary way for the mourners to participate in the mortuary state of their loved ones, by, in a sense becoming dead themselves.

Hertz concluded that death, for the Dayak tribe, had a dual purpose - ritual disintegration and ritual reintegration. For the dead, this meant the decomposition the body and the reintegration of the soul into a new afterlife. For the living

mourners, this meant social and psychological disintegration through grief then reintegration into everyday life.

As Christians, we take part in ritual impurities linked with death in order to become purified. Consider communion, when we participate in the death of Christ by eating his flesh and drinking his blood in order to experience regeneration as individuals and as a community.

Imagine the surprise of the Spanish Franciscan monks like Friar Bernardino de Sahagún who wrote about traveling to Mexico in the 16<sup>th</sup> century where he observed Aztec priests consecrating a statue of their god Huitzilopochtli made out bread, then breaking it apart and giving it to the people to eat. This Aztec ritual was enacted as a way of communing with their deity and gaining a measure of its power. At first, the missionaries thought that the Aztecs were imitating their own Christian eucharistic feast, but quickly realized that this ceremony preceded the arrival of Christianity. Christians are apparently not the only ones with a taste for transubstantiated baked goods.

Another way that we participate in the death and resurrection of Christ is by becoming baptized.

Did you know that for the first few centuries, there is evidence that some Christians were baptized nude?

Can you imagine if we still performed naked baptisms at TUMC? We'd attract quite a crowd!

One 4<sup>th</sup> century church father named Cyril of Jerusalem condoned the practice of naked baptism so that those being baptized could enter the water stripped bare as Christ was stripped bare on the cross. Baptism, then, is a believer's imitation of Christ's death and subsequent resurrection. It is a powerful religious paradox that we can die so that we can be born, the way that Jesus died in order to rise from the dead. This paradox is at the heart of baptism. St. Cyril said this to a group of freshly baptized believers:

*At the same moment you were both dying and being born; and that water of salvation was at once your grave and your mother.*

What an image! Baptism as the tomb and the womb.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he says: "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" (6:3-4).

By being baptized into Christ's death, we take off our cloak of corruption and sin and enter the baptismal pool naked before God. By being baptized into Christ's resurrection, we put on our new cloak of grace.

In C.S. Lewis' 5<sup>th</sup> book of the Narnia series, entitled *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, our heroes Edmund and Lucy find themselves accompanied on their magical sea adventures aboard the Dawn Treader by their very annoying cousin Eustace. He is introduced in the book with the line: "There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it." Lewis also writes that Eustace comes from a long line of annoying people, describing Eustace's parents as vegetarian, nonsmoking, teetotalers.

Much of the narrative of *The Dawn Treader* concerns the regeneration of Eustace as a person – the shedding of his old self and the putting on of his new self. At one point, Eustace wanders off by himself when the children's ship lands on an unexplored island. He finds a dragon's treasure hoard and falls asleep on top of it, waking up to find himself transformed into a dragon because of his own "greedy, dragonish thoughts." Eustace is miserable in his new body and begins to repent of his past deeds. Eventually, Aslan the lion comes to his aid and Eustace describes the following events like this:

*The lion told me to follow it...and I did...At last we came to the top of a mountain...and there was a garden – trees, fruit and everything. In the middle there was a well with the clearest of water...The Lion told me that he would have to undress me before I could go into the water...The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the [dragon] skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt...then he threw me in the water...and took me out and dressed me...in new clothes.*

The baptismal water is a treacherous place. St. Cyril refers to the book of Job, when the dragonish Behemoth takes the river Jordan into its jaws (40:23). Cyril says that Jesus is baptized in the river of Jordan so that he can liberate the water from the monster's grasp and defeat chaos once and for all.

Jesus' own baptism has always puzzled me theologically. In Matthew 3:11, John says to the crowd: "I baptize you with water for repentance". If repentance was the reason for John's baptism, then why was it necessary for Jesus to be baptized if he had no sins for which to repent?

According to St. Cyril's interpretation, Jesus' baptism is a repetition of God's creative act in the beginning, when God tamed the abyss and formed it into the created order. Every baptism, then, is much more than an apology and a promise to behave, every baptism is an imitation of Christ's baptism in which we participate in the repetition of God's original act of creation from chaos when God made all things good. Baptism, then, is the restoration of order through repentance and rebirth. A sprinkle on the head hardly seems sufficient for something so epic!

Communion and baptism are dramatic examples of ways in which believers participate in the death and resurrection of Christ. But there are other everyday ways in which this happens.

Jesus deliberately came into contact with death pollution every time he had contact with a leper. Leprosy is mentioned over 50 times in the Bible and appears to stand for all manner of infectious skin disease. Lepers were like the walking dead of the ancient world. They were banished from the company of the living and would even bury their own limbs like dead bodies. In Mathew 8, a man with leprosy "came and knelt before Jesus and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus reached out his hand and said "be clean!!" And the man was healed.

Jesus willingly defiles himself in order to make others clean. He takes on the sins of the world in order to make us clean. And Christ's atoning self-sacrifice and resurrection isn't some pseudo-historical one-time event, it is a living reality that permeates our lives through God's continuing grace and through every act of justice and love that we enact in the world on his behalf.

The Jews have a concept called Tikkun Olam, which means to repair the world. When God created the world, it was filled with light, but when sin entered the world, that light shattered and little sparks of it were spread out and hidden all over creation. But, through every act of kindness, each little spark of light comes out of hiding and joins the ever-growing light of creation, hence repairing the world. This is why I chose the passage from Luke 11 that says: “No one lights a lamp and puts it in a place where it will be hidden, or under a bowl. Instead, she puts it on a stand, so that those who come in may see the light” (v. 33).

We are simultaneously people of sin and people of grace. That is our reality. We fight our dragonish ways every day. In the biblical accounts, God manages to subdue the Leviathan and Behemoth, but they are not dead. They struggle daily against their chains. Good news for us, we are not alone. Through the death and resurrection of Christ, we are given the grace and find the strength to battle our demons of old while we grapple towards paradise.

I'll leave you with these words from Joni Mitchell's "Woodstock", a haunting song that reflects the hopeful longing of the 1960s for a better world.

*We are stardust*

*We are golden.*

*But we are caught up in the Devil's bargain*

*And we've got to get ourselves back to some semblance of the Garden.*

Amen.