

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 11, 2020

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Death Swallowed Up

Isaiah 25:6–9

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

**On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.
And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples,
the veil that is spread over all nations.
He will swallow up death forever;
and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces,
and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken.
It will be said on that day,
“Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.
This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”**

Even if we manage to defeat the coronavirus;
even if we manage to right racial injustice and social inequality,
even if we manage to overcome our political divisions,
save our republic and the environment;
even if science, technology, and economics enable us to make heaven on earth;
even if everything—and I do mean *everything*—goes exactly right,
death still waits for us.

No one makes it out alive.

No one.

Not Mother Teresa, not Mahatma Gandhi, not Martin Luther King, Jr.

They are dust, you are dust, I am dust.

And to dust we shall all return.

And death doesn't care who you vote for.

It doesn't care whether you vote at all.

Death doesn't care whether you wear a mask or shelter in place.

I'm not advocating political indifference, ignoring laws, or disregarding your neighbor,
just trying to put things in proper perspective.

You can't, in the end, escape death.

We know this from Scripture.

St. Paul tells us, "**The wages of sin is death**" (Rom 6:23).

We know this from experience.

Adam died.

Abraham died.

Moses died.

David died.

Even Isaiah, whose words we heard, died.

So many people we know have died.

What I mean is this:

Your candidate, your party, medical research, health advances,
whoever or whatever you put your hopes in—
they can do *nothing* about death.

There's nowhere you can escape.

The curse is universal.

All nations are subject to it,

even people who live on the most beautiful Caribbean or Pacific islands.

If this coronavirus time has revealed anything,

it has revealed just how thick the cloud of death over us is
and just how deep the fear of death runs
and just how impossible it is to escape.

Isaiah compares death to a covering, a thick veil, a heavy blanket, a dark mask,
an atmosphere of death hanging over the whole earth.

The black pall of death,

like dense pollution in the air.

We breathe it in; we breathe it out.

It's all around us.

It's suffocating.

Before, maybe, we could keep death out of sight, out of mind, but no more.

Now it's a daily statistic.

In Massachusetts, 10, 12, 8, 19 newly reported daily deaths among confirmed cases.

In the United States this year,

the number of "excess" deaths compared to previous years is 300,000.

And it's not just numbers.

It's personal, too: the names and faces of our loved ones, the obituaries we know—
fathers, mothers, relatives, friends, people we've prayed for—now dead.

What we see, what we hear, what we feel, what we know is death.

But Isaiah sees something more.

Isaiah sees that, although the covering of death hangs over all nations,
death doesn't win.

Death isn't the end.

God gave the prophet a vision of something else:

a mountain, a feast, death destroyed, tears wiped away.

God sees what death has done,

what death is doing to us,

what death will do.

God hears our groaning, our cries for help, our prayers for mercy.

And God acts—He acts not only to redeem and rescue us from death.

He does more.

Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

He prepares a table for us—for you and me—in the presence of our enemies.

When the Scriptures speak of the end of all things, of the consummation of all desire,

of the joy that awaits us, it speaks not only of the end of death

but of the feast of victory that is awaiting us.

It happens on a mountain.

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples

a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,

of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined (v 6).

A meal served in the presence of the Lord God.

A meal where we are with our God face to face.

It recalls for us Exodus 24.

You may remember the account there.

It's right after Moses leads God's people Israel out of Egypt,

they've gathered at Mount Sinai,

They've received the Ten Commandments,

and then Moses, Nadab, Abihu, and 70 elders of Israel ascended Mount Sinai.

This is what happened there.

They saw the God of Israel.

There was under His feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone,

like the very heaven for clearness.

And He didn't lay His hand on the chief men of the people of Israel;

they beheld God, and ate and drank (Ex 24:9–11).

They were alive and feasted in the presence of God,

a picture and foretaste of what was and is to come.

This is what we're looking forward to.

The pall of death no longer hanging over us,
but ripped apart on that mountain.

Or think forward from Isaiah's time to another mountain slope
where Jesus gathered with 5,000 hunger people.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst . . . for they shall be satisfied (Mt 5:6 // Lk 6:21).

Jesus took bread and broke it and gave it to His disciples to feed 5,000 people.

There were at least a dozen baskets left over.

And they all ate and were satisfied on that mountain.

We can think as well of another mountain,

the mountain our Lord Himself ascended, alone, with a cross laid on His back.

It didn't look like He was going to a feast.

It didn't look like there would be any victory.

It looked like death was finally going to win.

You remember what happened.

It was the middle of the day, from noon until 3:00 pm,

and it was like the sun had gone out.

Darkness covered the whole earth.

That pall of death—it seemed like it dropped lower and lower and lower,

until it enveloped everyone,

and our Lord hanging there on the cross, dying there on the cross,

taking everything that death had to give Him,

our Lord breathing His last, saying, "It is finished," and being laid in the tomb.

You better believe on that Good Friday it looked like death had won the victory.

There were no fist pumps among the disciples when Jesus died,

no elbow bumps or high fives.

The disciples were in hiding; they'd run away.

They thought it was over.

They thought that death had won.

It hadn't.

We know that death's victory there was short lived.

Where death thought it had won, it had really lost.

It had been disarmed.

Jesus wrestled it to the ground and took away death's weapons and death's power.

On that mountain, God won the victory over death.

He swallowed it up.

And all of it, all these mountains—Sinai, in Isaiah, the feeding of the 5,000—

all looking ahead to the cross and from the cross to the feast we look forward to,

the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom on the new and eternal Mount Zion.

This is what the apostle John describes when He sees the vision of the end,
 when the veil gets ripped open and He sees the revelation of Jesus Christ,
 as it is and was and will be forever.

John says:

**I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude,
 like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder,
 crying out,
 “Hallelujah!
 For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.
 Let us rejoice and exult
 and give Him the glory
 for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
 and His Bride has made herself ready;
 it was granted her to clothe herself
 with fine linen, bright and pure”** (Rev 19:6–8).

Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:9).

The invitation He extends to you right now.

The invitation to come and receive the foretaste of the endless feast.

Don't despise it.

And don't come to the feast dressed in your own works.

Come dressed in the righteousness He gives.

When we enter into our service,

we don't bring our works, our deeds, our righteousness,
 but our sin.

We confess it, and God clothes us with the absolution.

He makes us ready to receive His feast.

And what is the feast about?

What are they celebrating?

This is not just a small victory.

God hasn't just given death a black eye or sent it reeling.

He has swallowed death up—swallowed it up forever and ever and ever.

And we've already seen hints of it:

the widow of Nain's son being carried out for burial, and he sits up;
 Jairus's daughter, whom they are convinced is dead and gone forever,
 but Jesus says her death is but a sleep:

“Talitha cumi, little girl, I say to you, arise!”;

or Lazarus, who walked out of the grave after four days dead,
 can you imagine what that was like?

Martin Luther had an interesting way of looking at Christ's victory over death,
probably from a plague time that he lived through.

He said,

“As a plague consumes the body little by little,
so Christ is the pestilence of our death and of our old Adam.” [read again]

Luther compares Jesus to a plague of death.

Christ is the pandemic of death, and death will not win.

Christ Jesus is death's worst nightmare.

He destroyed death with one fell swoop on the cross,

and now little by little He's reclaiming death's victims,

taking Home those who belong to Him,

and keeping their souls until He raises their bodies as well on the last day.

On this mountain—this altar mountain—

our God has prepared a feast of victory over death.

He brings a taste of that feast to you today.

Today death is replaced with life.

Today sorrow is replaced with joy

Today a feast of unimaginable proportions.

Did you notice how this reading describes tears?

He will wipe away tears forever.

How tender!

The Master of the universe bends down to us with our tears flowing

over the death of our loved ones and wiping them away the tears.

And not just wiping them away so more can flow,

but wiping away tears because He takes away the cause of our tears.

Death is undone.

Our God lifts the covering, the veil, the mask of death.

He takes away the stain, the shame, the reproach.

It will be said on that day,

and, looking ahead, we say it already today,

“Behold, this our God;

we have waited for Him, that He might save us.

This is the Lord; we have waited for Him;

let us be glad and rejoice in His salvation” (Isa 25:9).

The Savior has come; the Savior is coming; the Savior will come again
with our salvation in His hands.

Rejoice and be glad—in the Lord, because we see what’s coming.

What is hidden will be revealed.

The day is coming when this feast will explode open

and we will see our God face to face—

the day of the resurrection to the heavenly Feast.

His promises, His victory, His salvation have pierced death’s veil.

Friends, we don’t have to live as if death is always hanging over us,

as if death will have the last and final word.

Let’s live as if life, not death, were always ahead us, because it is;

let’s press forward toward the resurrection, for Christ is raised and we will be raised;

let’s live as if the veil was thin and getting thinner, because it is;

because God has already poked the biggest hole ever in the covering of death

and rays of resurrection light already are already shining through.

Death may be something now,

but on that day, death will be no more.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ
Jesus.

Phil 4:7
