

## LENT MESSAGE APRIL 1, 2020

Good evening. Grace and mercy and peace to all of you through God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

This evening I'd like to talk with you a bit about an unpleasant subject, an unpopular subject, and the subject is death.

With the current virus hovering around and bringing death to many people—now beginning to include people who may be close to us, death is the last thing we like to talk about.

But this evening, I'd like to try to show you a better way, even a positive way to think about death.

So, we will make our beginning in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The title of this evening's message is:

### **LISTEN FOR THE DISTANT TRIUMPH SONG!**

"Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead, through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." (*Romans 6:3-4*)

In Christ Jesus, dear friends:

When I was a kid, I loved science fiction. I read all the famous authors—Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Arthur c. Clarke—all of them.

One of my favorite stories was a novel about a man who could travel through time by dying. Each time he died he would reappear in the future as a new person—but it would still be him inside.

I remember it occurring to me that if you knew that when you died you would just pop up with a new body and a new name, it would take away the fear of death. It would even make dying kind of adventuresome and exciting.

Now in a strange way the plot of that story resembles what Paul was saying in the scripture I just read. What Paul was saying is that when we were baptized, in some mysterious way we died and were reborn. We came out a new person—except that it was still us inside.

We became born-again Christians.

Jesus said to Nikodemus: “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born again of water and the spirit.”

To be born again of water and the spirit is to be baptized. As Paul wrote to Titus: “we are saved through the washing of rebirth and renewal of the holy spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our savior.” To be baptized is to die and be reborn a new person—except it is still us inside.

To understand how this works, we have to go back and talk about something that happened a long time ago when one of the most powerful angels in heaven decided that he was too proud to serve God.

So, he organized a rebellion against God and drew one third of the other angels to his side. War broke out in heaven and the proud angel was cast out of heaven along with the angels who followed him. He became the fallen angel we know as Satan and his followers became his demons.

Now even though Satan had lost the war in heaven, he had no thought of quitting, but continued his war against God here on earth. Since he couldn't defeat God, he set his sights on ruining those whom God loved best and who bore his image: mankind.

In Peter's words, he began, “...prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.”

Employing his arsenal of lies, he set about convincing people that his way—the way of pride and rebellion—was superior to God's way—the way of love and obedience.

And people believed him! They bought into his lies big time—and still do.

But God had a plan to win people back—to rescue them from Satan's trap. Satan's strategy was simple: he would simply hold God to his own words. God had commanded Adam not to seek the knowledge of evil and warned him that if he disobeyed that command he would die.

But by using lies, Satan convinced Adam and Eve that pride and disobedience would make them equal to God. So, they disobeyed God's command; they sought and acquired the knowledge of evil. And they bequeathed their spirit of pride and disobedience to all of their descendants.

And so, we who are all descendants of Adam and Eve are by nature prideful and disobedient to God and therefore under sentence of death. Satan simply demanded that God honor his promise. It was demonic, to be sure, but one cannot say that it was unjust.

God had said it and it must be so, for God cannot lie.

But God outwitted Satan by sending his son, Jesus Christ to assume the responsibility for all of our pride and disobedience and pay the penalty for them by dying on the cross.

By dying for our sins, Jesus became our divine scapegoat. By paying the full penalty for all of our sins, Jesus left Satan with no market for his lies. Once a penalty is paid, it doesn't have to be repaid.

So, Satan was emasculated at calvary. Instead of being the proud kahuna of hades, he became the eunuch from hell when his power was taken away with three words: "it is finished."

"it is finished" meant that the penalty had been paid in full and there was no further payment required. Jesus had paid the penalty and that was the end of the story.

We who were prisoners in Satan's palace have been seized by one stronger than Satan, plunged into baptismal waters and drawn out with new life pulsing in our veins.

And as we live our lives in this world, every single day we have the opportunity to live out our baptism by dying to disobedience and rebellion and rising up in faith and hope and love.

Jesus explains this by using an example from nature.

"I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." A seed dies and rots in the soil and a new plant rises up out of it and bears fruit. And so, do we die to sin and unbelief rise up in faith and hope and love.

And I believe that that especially applies to our lives right now as we live under the threat of this virus.

We are confined to our homes and have death hovering around us, but when we look out our windows, what do we see?

We see life! We see new life emerging from the ground. We see daffodils and crocuses blooming. We see trees that shed their dead leaves last fall putting forth buds which will soon explode into new life. We see all nature singing praises to its creator. We see all creation pulsing with the cycle of life.

And now we come to the death we fear the most: the death that ends our life in this world. And there's no sugar-coating this death: it's a horrible, unnatural thing. Death may be inevitable in a fallen world, but it is not natural.

God created us to live eternally—not to die. Death is an intruder an alien presence in God's creation. Therefore, it's hard for us to deal with—even though we know that it leads to eternal life.

Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus, even though he knew that he was going to raise him up to life a few minutes later. He wept over the fact of death—that there is death in the world along because of all the misery and suffering it brings. He wept because he knew—as we all know—that sooner or later the grave will swallow up all of us.

But thanks be to God, death does not have the final say.

In Christ there is always new life—new life after we were baptized, new life every spring, new life after this virus goes away, and new life after the grave.

No matter what happens, God's plan for us is life: —life here and life in eternity.

It doesn't always feel like life—especially when we're surrounded by death, but for those who trust in God, death is only a doorway to life—just like the guy in the science fiction novel

So, don't be misled by our enemy's lies: God is the God of the living, not the dead. He is always there and he is always near. In the words of one of my favorite hymns:

“and when the strife is fierce, the warfare long, steals on the ear the distant triumph song, and hearts are brave again and arms are strong! Allelujah! Allelujah!

So always, always listen for the distant triumph song!

Amen.