

DYING TO LIVE

OUR GOSPEL LESSON FOR TODAY REMINDS ME OF AN OBITUARY I READ SEVERAL YEARS AGO ANNOUNCING THE DEATH OF THE MAN WHO INVENTED THE HOKEY POKEY. APPARENTLY THEY HAD SOME PROBLEMS AT THE FUNERAL HOME PREPARING HIM FOR BURIAL. AS THEY TRIED TO PLACE HIM IN HIS COFFIN, FIRST THEY PUT HIS LEFT FOOT IN.... OH WELL, YOU KNOW THE REST OF THE STORY. AS A DISILLUSIONED PASTOR ONCE REMARKED AFTER A SPARSELY ATTENDED SERVICE: *"MAYBE THE HOKEY POKEY IS WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT."*

WELL, THE HOKEY POKEY IS *NOT* WHAT CHRISTIANITY IS ALL ABOUT. WHAT CHRISTIANITY IS ALL ABOUT IS DEATH AND RESURRECTION.

THE BIBLE BEGINS WITH DEATH, WHICH ADAM AND EVE BROUGHT INTO THE WORLD THROUGH THEIR SIN AND PASSED ALONG TO ALL THEIR DESCENDANTS. IT THEN TURNS TO RESURRECTION WITH GOD'S PROMISE OF A SAVIOR WHO WOULD CONQUER DEATH AND GIVE US NEW LIFE. IT DESCRIBES HOW THIS SAVIOR WOULD COME INTO THE WORLD, DIE TO ATONE FOR OUR SINS, AND THEN RISE FROM THE DEAD. THUS HE WOULD CONQUER DEATH AND OFFER ETERNAL LIFE TO ALL WHO PLACED THEIR FAITH IN HIM.

AND SO IT CAME TO PASS: GOD BECAME A MAN, JESUS CHRIST OF NAZARETH, WHO DIED ON MOUNT CALVARY, WAS BURIED IN A TOMB, AND ROSE AGAIN ON THE THIRD DAY AFTER HIS DEATH. AND SO WE, WHO HAVE PLACED OUR FAITH IN HIM, CAN NOW LOOK FORWARD TO ETERNAL LIFE WITH HIM IN HEAVEN. SO THIS IS THE PATTERN: HUMAN DEATH, DIVINE DEATH, DIVINE RESURRECTION, HUMAN RESURRECTION.

NOT ONLY IS DEATH AND RESURRECTION THE PATTERN OF SALVATION HISTORY—IT'S ALSO THE PATTERN OF OUR LIVES IN THE WORLD AS CHRISTIANS. WE SPEND OUR LIVES AS BELIEVERS SHARING IN CHRIST'S DEATH AND HIS RESURRECTION. AND WHAT WE NEED TO REMEMBER IS THAT IN ORDER TO BE RESURRECTED—WE FIRST HAVE TO DIE. SO LET'S BEGIN BY TALKING ABOUT DEATH.

FIRST OF ALL, THANKS TO ADAM AND EVE WE ARE BORN UNDER THE SENTENCE OF DEATH AND SPEND OUR LIVES ON DEATH ROW. EVERY DAY WE WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH. OF COURSE WHEN WE'RE YOUNG WE DON'T THINK MUCH ABOUT THIS FACT. WE KNOW WE'RE GOING TO DIE SOMEDAY BUT SOMEDAY IS A LONG WAY OFF AND IT RARELY EVEN COMES TO MIND. ALL WE SEE AHEAD ARE GREEN PASTURES, BLUE SKIES, SMILING FACES AND A BOATLOAD OF FUN.

LIFE IS A BOWL OF CHERRIES AND OUR JOB IS TO PARTAKE OF THEM. WE LAUGH AND SAY, "IT'S A TOUGH JOB BUT SOMEBODY'S GOT TO DO IT!" AND WE CAN'T IMAGINE THAT IT WILL EVER END. BUT AT SOME POINT, THINGS BEGIN TO CHANGE. AS THE SONG GOES, *"THINGS GET COMPLICATED WHEN YOU GET PAST EIGHTEEN."* LIFE'S BURDENS BEGIN TO SETTLE UPON US.

WE BEGIN TO SEE THE EFFECTS OF OUR SINS ON OTHER PEOPLE AND FEEL THE EFFECTS OF THEIR SINS UPON US. OUR FLAWS START BECOME APPARENT TO US—AND TO OTHERS: FLAWS IN OUR CHARACTER, OUR MORALS, OUR BEHAVIOR.

FAILURES COME CRASHING DOWN: FAILED CAREERS, FAILED RELATIONSHIPS, FAILED MARRIAGES. TIME DRAWS ON AND AGE SETS IN, THE FORERUNNERS OF DEATH BEGIN TO APPEAR: HEALTH PROBLEMS, CHRONIC PAINS, MEMORY PROBLEMS, PROBLEMS GETTING AROUND.

THE GREEN PASTURES AND BLUE SKIES ARE GONE AND THE SHADOW OF DEATH BEGINS GROW LONGER AND LONGER. WE SENSE ITS INEVITABILITY. THE WATERS OF THE JORDAN WILL BE COLD AND WE HAVE NO BOAT TO CARRY US ACROSS. WE MUST PLUNGE INTO IT AND SINK AND DROWN BEFORE WE CAN REACH CANAAN LAND. AND WE HAVE TO DO IT ALONE. AND WE'RE AFRAID.

SUCH IS THE END OF OUR LIFE IN THIS WORLD. LIKE OUR SAVIOR, WE WERE BORN TO DIE AND THAT FACT BECOMES MORE AND MORE APPARENT TO US AS WE LIVE. PAUL PUTS IT THIS WAY: "...ALL CREATION...IS IN BONDAGE TO DECAY." LUTHER—AS USUAL—PUT IT BLUNTLY: "*IN THE MIDST OF LIFE WE ARE IN THE MIDST OF DEATH. WE SEE DEATH ALL AROUND US: TEMPORAL DEATH, ETERNAL DEATH, EVERYWHERE, DEATH AND MORE DEATH.*"

WITH ADAM'S FALL WE ALL SINNED AND THE PRICE OF OUR SINS IS DEATH. BUT THEN GOD DOES A SURPRISING THING--AN INCREDIBLE THING: HE USES DEATH TO CREATE NEW LIFE! HE DOESN'T JUST REPLACE DEATH WITH LIFE; HE ACTUALLY CEATES LIFE OUT OF DEATH. TO PUT IT PLAINLY, DEATH FURNISHES THE MATERIAL OUT OF WHICH GOD CREATES NEW LIFE.

LISTEN TO WHAT JESUS SAYS ABOUT SEEDS: "*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 IS PLANTED IN THE GROUND AND AS IT ABSORBS THE MOISTURE AND HEAT OF THE EARTH IT DECOMPOSES. IN OTHER WORDS, IT ROTS. AND THEN, OUT OF ITS DECAY GOD FASHIONS NEW LIFE. HE FORMS A SEEDLING, IT PUSHES ITS WAY TOWARD THE SURFACE OF THE GROUND, BREAKS THROUGH TO SUNLIGHT AND GROWS INTO A LARGE, FRUIT-BEARING PLANT. AND THE FRUIT OF THE NEW PLANT CONTAINS SEEDS WHICH ARE THE SOURCE OF NEW LIFE. GOD CREATES LIFE OUT OF DEATH.

IN PAUL'S WORDS, HE TURNS THE GROANING OF A DYING CREATION INTO LABOR PAINS WHICH WILL END UP GIVING BIRTH TO NEW LIFE. GOD HAS PLANTED THE SEEDS OF NEW LIFE IN DEATH ITSELF.

NOW CONSIDER WHAT THIS MEANS FOR OUR LIVES AS CHRISTIANS. THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS WE GO THROUGH IN OUR LIVES ARE LITTLE DEATHS, BUT THEY ALL CONTAIN THE SEEDS OF LITTLE RESURECTIONS. "*FOR WE KNOW THAT GOD CAUSES ALL THINGS—ALL THINGS—TO WORK TOGETHER FOR GOOD IN THE LIVES OF THOSE WHO LOVE HIM AND HAVE BEEN CALLED ACCORDING TO HIS PURPOSE.*" AND "ALL THINGS" INCLUDES TRIALS, TRIBULATIONS, SUFFERINGS AND SETBACKS.

THEREFORE, PAUL WRITES: "*WE REJOICE IN OUR SUFFERINGS, KNOWING THAT SUFFERING PRODUCES PATIENCE, PATIENCE PRODUCES CHARACTER, CHARACTER PRODUCES HOPE. AND HOPE DOES NOT DISAPPOINT US FOR GOD HAS Poured OUT HIS LOVE INTO OUR HEARTS BY THE HOLY SPIRIT, WHOM HE HAS GIVEN US.*" AND SO, JUST AS OUR EVENTUAL DEATH WILL BE FOLLOWED BY NEW LIFE, WHEN WE KEEP FAITH DURING OUR SUFFERINGS THEY WILL BE FOLLOWED BY NEW BLESSINGS.

KEEPING THE LIGHT OF FAITH DURING OUR SUFFERINGS BANISHES THE DARKNESS OF HATE AND FEAR WHICH OUR ENEMY CASTS UPON THEM.

WHEN WE FIND OURSELVES ASSAULTED BY SICKNESS AND PAIN AND FAILURE AND DISAPPOINTMENT, SATAN WHISPERS IN OUR EAR: *"WHERE IS YOUR LOVING GOD NOW? WOULD A MERCIFUL GOD REALLY ALLOW THIS TO HAPPEN!"* LIKE JOB'S WIFE, HE SAYS: *"ARE YOU STILL HOLDING ON TO YOUR FAITH? CURSE GOD AND DIE!"* BUT HE IS A LIAR!

WHEN IN FAITH WE CLING TO THE PROMISE OF NEW LIFE EMERGING FROM DEATH, OF BLESSINGS COMING OUT OF OUR SUFFERING—WE CAST OFF SATAN ALONG WITH ALL HIS LIES. POOR OLD LUCIFER! GOD OUTWITS HIM AT EVERY TURN. IT'S IN THE ADVERSITIES OF SICKNESS AND PAIN AND FAILURE AND FEAR—HIS ARSENAL OF WEAPONS THAT HE HURLS AGAINST US—THAT GOD HAS PLANTED SEEDS OF HOPE FOR NEW LIFE.

LIFE FOR A BELIEVER CONSISTS OF LITTLE DEATHS AND LITTLE RESURRECTIONS EVERY DAY. EVERY NIGHT WE DIE TO THE SINS OF THE PREVIOUS DAY AND EVERY MORNING WE RISE UP FREE AND CLEANSED OF ALL THAT HAS GONE BEFORE. EVERY DAY WE DIE A LITTLE WHEN WE REPENT OF OUR SINS AND FLEE TO THE CROSS FOR FORGIVENESS. THEN WE COME AWAY AS RISEN CHILDREN, PURE AND FREE AND INNOCENT AND JOYFUL.

EVERY TIME WE REMEMBER OUR BAPTISM, WE REMEMBER THE DEATH OF OUR OLD MAN AND THE RISING UP OF THE NEW MAN. PAUL WRITES: *"...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 WALK IN NEWNESS OF LIFE."*

EVERY DAY A CHRISTIAN DIES AND EVERY DAY HE IS REBORN. CHRISTIAN LIVING IS NOT A MATTER OF SELF-IMPROVEMENT, IT'S A MATTER OF SELF-DENIAL.

FIGURATIVELY SPEAKING, IT'S ALLOWING GOD TO CUT OFF THE HAND THAT SINS AND GOUGE OUT THE EYE THAT LUSTS—OF MORTIFYING THE DESIRES OF THE FLESH SO THAT THE HOLY SPIRIT THAT DWELLS WITHIN US CAN THRIVE. OF ALLOWING THE HOLY SPIRIT TO SET US FREE FROM THE LAW OF SIN AND OF DEATH. OF EMPTYING OUR MINDS OF SELF-WORSHIP AND REPLACING IT WITH THE WORSHIP OF CHRIST. IN SHORT, TO LIVE IN CHRIST AND ALLOW CHRIST TO LIVE IN US. OF DYING TO THIS LIFE SO THAT WE CAN BE REBORN IN THE NEXT.

I'M PRETTY SURE I'VE SHARED THIS STORY WITH WITH YOU BEFORE, BUT IT APPLIES SO PERFECTLY TO WHAT I'VE BEEN TALKING ABOUT, I'M GOING TO SHARE IT AGAIN! IMAGINE THAT YOU'RE OUT IN THE COUNTRY IN YOUR CAR IN A BLIZZARD AND YOU SKID INTO A DITCH. YOU CAN'T GET THE CAR OUT OF THE DITCH. SO YOU GET YOUR CELL PHONE OUT AND CALL A TOW TRUCK. WHEN THE TRUCK ARRIVES, JESUS IS THE DRIVER.

YOU THINK: *"THIS IS GREAT! HE'S GOING TO HITCH UP MY CAR AND TOW ME BACK TO HIS DEPOT AND WE'LL HAVE A NICE CUP OF HOT CHOCOLATE TOGETHER AND HE CAN ANSWER ALL THE QUESTIONS I'VE BEEN STORING UP FOR YEARS."* BUT THAT'S NOT WHAT HAPPENS. INSTEAD, JESUS PARKS HIS TRUCK, GETS INTO YOUR CAR IN THE

PASSENGER SEAT, TAKES YOUR HAND IN HIS—AND YOU DIE TOGETHER AND WAKE UP IN PARADISE.

FIRST YOU DIE; THEN YOU RISE. FIRST THE SEED FALLS TO THE GROUND AND ROTS; THEN IT GIVES BIRTH TO NEW LIFE. JESUS INVITES US TO DIE WITH HIM SO THAT WE CAN LIVE WITH HIM. “IF ANYONE WOULD COME AFTER ME, HE MUST DENY HIMSELF AND TAKE UP HIS CROSS AND FOLLOW ME. FOR WHOEVER WANTS TO SAVE HIS LIFE WILL LOSE IT, BUT WHOEVER LOSES HIS LIFE FOR ME WILL FIND IT.”

IT IS IN DEATH—AND IN THE MINI-DEATHS THAT PRECEDE DEATH—THAT THE SEEDS OF NEW LIFE ABIDE. GOD HAS PLANTED THEM THERE. HE WATERS THEM WITH HIS WORD AND SACRAMENTS AND THEY GROW AND BLOSSOM AND BEAR FRUIT THROUGH OUR FAITH. WE DIE TO LIVE AND WE LIVE TO DIE. IT’S THE RYTHYM OF LIFE.

AMEN.

Genesis 2:13-17

¹³ The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush.

¹⁴ The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Ashur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

Romans 5:1-11 Peace and Hope

⁵ Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. ³ Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

⁶ You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

⁹ Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! ¹⁰ For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! ¹¹ Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

John 12:20-26 Jesus Predicts His Death

²⁰ Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival.

²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. “Sir,” they

said, “we would like to see Jesus.”²² Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

²³ Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Very truly I tell you, 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. ²⁵ Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.