

Sunday, August 6, 2017 – Week after Pentecost
“Death and Life”

Isaiah 55: 1-5

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Central Image – Single Focus

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

In 1538, the Dance of Death made its way into the Bible.

An early print edition of the Old Testament included artwork called Life after the Fall, a woodcut by Hans Holbein. In his woodcut, Holbein pictured the first man and woman, Adam and Eve both involved in tedious, painful labor. Adam is tilling the ground and Eve is nursing a child. Near Adam, however, one sees death, a skeleton tilling the field. Near Eve, death again is visible, an hourglass measuring the limits of our lives. Death is everywhere, hounding our efforts and measuring our days, so that we “labor for what does not satisfy” (Is 55:2).

In his woodcut, Holbein was actually creatively appropriating a much larger painting and a much larger tradition. In St. Mary’s church in Lübeck, there was a painting nearly 100 feet long, weaving itself along the walls of a small chapel. The painting filled the walls with life-sized figures in a chain dance with death. Death was weaving itself in and out of the figures, calling to them to “Come here to the dance.” People old and young, rich and poor, from the pope and the emperor to the hermit and the peasant were invited by Death. “I call everybody to this dance.” Even an infant who cannot walk heard Death’s invitation and was invited to the dance. Gathering for worship, one was surrounded by the figures dancing with death. You never knew when Death might extend his invitation and take your hand.

Although it took so long for the Dance of Death to make its way into the Bible, God’s people have long heard death’s call. Isaiah gives voice to the question that has troubled all people ever since the fall into sin: “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?”

Why do we do that? Because that is all we are able to do. From the glossy magazine ads that litter our life to the billboards that hover in the sky, our world is filled with merchants crying out to us: “Come and buy.” Why? To make the little bit of life that we have satisfying, because, in the end, nothing will last. All will decay. Death will whisper its invitation to “Come” and all our labor will be in vain.

Does this fatalism make its way into your life? Into God's Church? "Well, things are going to pot anyway, might as well hunker in and wait for Jesus because this is all going to decay and disappear one day anyway, the world is too far gone. Let's look for a little comfort and contentment wherever it can be found.

In contrast to the Dance of Death, Isaiah gives voice to the Lord of Life. Like Death, the Lord's call is to everyone (v. 1). No one is excluded. But unlike Death, the Lord's call brings people life. The life the Lord offers is rich ("wine and milk" in v. 1 and "rich food" in v. 2) and free ("without money and without price" in v.1). It will answer the deepest needs of human experience, bringing eternal life to the soul (v. 3). Most surprisingly this call is not new. It is one that reaches deep into Israel's past (based on God's covenant love to King David, v. 3) and one that reaches out to embrace the world's future (as all nations come to this one the Lord glorifies, v. 5). Even "a nation that you do not know" and "a nation that did not know you" (v. 5) will join in the feast. In this text, Isaiah issues a call from the Lord of Life and his voice triumphs over the Dance of Death.

This call has not stayed in the promises of prophecy but taken on flesh in Jesus Christ. He came to dance our dance with death, died on a cross, and rose victorious never to die again. Suddenly, the church is surrounded with a chorus of witnesses, who invite the world to life. The apostle Paul heard this call and proclaiming the certainty of all of God's promises made known in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (Acts 13:34). The author of Hebrews gave voice to this call as he closed his letter with words of benediction blessing (Heb 13:20).

From the voice of Wisdom calling out to all people to come to the house of the Lord (Prv 9:1-6) to the voice Jesus raised above the din and banter of the temple to invite all who are thirsty to come to him (Jn 7:37) to the voice of John, aged and exiled, closing out his vision of the end of all things with the simple cry of the church to "Come" (Rv 22:17), this cry of the Lord of Life is sounded over and over again. It is an eternal cry of salvation for all. It comes from the one who danced with death, died on a cross, and rose victorious never to die again. This is the cry that Jesus will raise on the last day. By the power of his life, he will raise all people from the dead and, by the power of his love, he will call all who believe in him to enter into the new creation when their bodies are resurrected in the life of the age to come.

Because of the fall, the Dance of Death made its way into the Scriptures. Because of God's grace in Jesus Christ, the Lord of Life is making his way into our world. In 1538, we have a moment when the Dance of Death visually marked the pages of the Bible – but there's more.

I'd like you to watch a few moments of a video. (Show clip) You probably picked up that this video was taken somewhere in the Middle East. Perhaps, you think, it's some kind of protest. Perhaps it even feels uncomfortable to watch. Let me give you some context. On Palm Sunday this year ISIS bombed a couple of Christian churches in Egypt. The news media wondered aloud if Christian churches throughout the Middle East, and perhaps even in Europe would cancel services for Holy Week and Easter. Meanwhile, this crowd gathered. They gathered outside the very church that was bombed. Among this crowd were people who lost loved ones, and were there for the moment of the traumatic blast, the spread of shrapnel and the percussive force of explosive heat that blew them back. The people you just saw joined together, defying the terror intended for them and shouted the Nicene Creed in Arabic in the streets of Cairo. That's what we were hearing. Where death grabbed headlines and spread terror, the Lord of Life sparked trust and confidence to proclaim the truth of "the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come, Amen!"

Today, the question I leave with you to ponder is this: how is the Lord of Life reaching out from the Scriptures to make his mark upon our world? Where is his call? What does it sound like and look like? How is God, through you, through us as a church, calling out to the peoples that do not know him and sharing with them this life that is rich and free and brings eternal life to the soul? In Jesus' name, Amen.