

First Sunday of Lent, March 5, 2006, Liturgical Year "B"

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

"Overcoming the Sting of Death" (part 1)

THE THIRD AND FINAL ENEMY

Almost a year ago I began a sermon series entitled, *"Know Your Enemy: the Real Axis of Evil."* If you recall, I said there were three major enemies that everyone in our world faces. In fact, they are the greatest enemies of our world, greater than war, poverty and disease.

We looked at the first enemy – Satan or the devil. How there is a real devil and a real world of supernatural evil that seeks to influence and control the hearts of men and thwart God's purposes and plans for our world and universe.

We also looked at the second enemy - our sinful human nature – called "the flesh" in the Bible. This enemy is ultimately the most insidious because as long as we are alive on planet earth, we will have to do battle with our sinful, selfish human nature. And just because you become a Christian doesn't mean that your sinful human nature is eradicated. In fact, when the Holy Spirit comes into our hearts there will then be a full fledged war going on, because now we have something that opposes our flesh.

The good news, however, is that both of these enemies have been defeated by our Lord Jesus Christ. As a result we can have victory over these two terrible enemies. But victory will only be experienced if we appropriate the tools and power Christ has given us each and everyday.

It is no different with the third and final enemy. The Bible says, *"The last enemy to be defeated is death."* (I Cor. 15). Notice that I didn't entitle this part of the series as "Overcoming Death," but rather "Overcoming the Sting of Death." You see we're not going to overcome death, itself. We're all going to die, unless Jesus comes back beforehand. But it's the "sting" of death that we have to deal with, isn't it? That sick feeling that comes over us, that feeling of great loss, even hopelessness when a loved one dies, or the contemplation of our own mortality, having to come to grips with the fact that there's coming a time when our life on earth is no more. If we're not careful, such feelings can lead to anxiety, fear and depression.

And when we're dead there is no turning back. Doesn't matter what anybody says or does. I am reminded of what happened to a resident of Greenville County, South Carolina. It seems that they received a letter from the Department of Health and Human Services which said, *"Your food stamps will be stopped, effective March 1992, because we received notice that you passed away. May God bless you. You may reapply if your circumstances change."* Well, when you're dead, there is no chance for reapplication to life on this earth. Even those raised from the dead, will live only to die another day. We can't avoid it.

EXTREME REACTIONS

Now when it comes to death what we find two extremes in our world. First, there is fear

and aversion to dealing with death and our own mortality. Most people don't like to talk about or plan for death. It's usually the last thing on their minds. On the other hand, we also find an obsession when it comes to death. There seems to be this fascination with death. Turn on the television and notice how many dramas and news programs deal with the demise of someone else - whether it is murder, accidental killings, and a terminal illness. And then, of course, much of what is considered entertainment simply glorifies death and violence. Whether it is the music of heavy metal rock bands and rap artists, or movies at the cinema. So we see these two tendencies. On the one hand there's avoidance, on the other hand, obsession. Both are dysfunctional. Both emanate from living in a fallen world.

The Bible, however, paints a very balanced view of death. We are not to dwell on the things of death, but we are to dwell on the things of life. The Apostle Paul says in **Philippians 4:8**: ***"Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy, meditate on these things."*** And yet we are not to ignore our own mortality, either. **Psalm 90:12** prays, ***"Teach us to number our days, that we may gain wisdom."***

Yes, the Bible teaches that all will experience death. It doesn't sugar coat death, it doesn't say oh everything is going to be fine, but it also affirms that death does not have the final say.

WHY DEATH?

But now if that's the case why is there death in the first place? Why is death an integral part of God's created order. Why do we die? What's the purpose? What could God possibly have in mind when He allowed death to enter His creation?

Well first, we need to understand that God did not create us to die. His intention was that we have life, and that it be forever. God not only made Adam and Eve and put them in the garden; He gave them the whole earth and told them to enjoy creation. He made them like Himself: He made them in His image. They only had one requirement; do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. For in that day, they would die. **(Gen. 2:17)**. While we do not know what this tree looked like, we do know that God was setting up parameters to human existence, **and Adam and Eve crossed those parameters**. As a result there would be punishment, for God is God of holiness and righteousness and truth. He could not just sweep their disobedience under the rug. Otherwise, that would make Him a liar. There had to be accountability. Thus, death entered into the human experience.

IT REFLECTS THE PROBLEM OF OUR SIN

So the first thing death teaches us is that there is a problem in the human heart, and that problem is what the Bible calls "sin." Jesus said, ***"It's not what goes into a man that defiles him, but it is what comes out of a man. For from within out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornication, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man."*** (Mark 7:18-23).

And this sinful human nature from which this sinful behavior comes always leads to death. ***"There is a way that seems right to a man, but only leads to death."*** Proverbs 16:25. James 1:14-15: ***"But each is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and sin when it is full grown brings forth death."***

Our rebellion is so pervasive that it affects all of creation. St. Paul says in Romans 8:22 that since the beginning ***"the whole creation groans in labor pains"*** for God's deliverance. And that's why the Bible says, ***"In Adam all die..."*** (1 Cor. 15:22). This problem is sin. Frank Sinatra summed it up perfectly when he sang, *"I Did It My Way."* I'll do my thing, I'll make my plans, I'll do it my way. And God says, "You do it your way, and you will die." So death confronts us with the problem of sin.

IT REQUIRES THE ACCOUNTABILITY OF OUR LIFE

Second, death requires us to be accountable. We are given great freedom in this life, freedom to choose between right and wrong. Thankfully we live in a nation governed by the principles of liberty and justice. In some nations people don't have that freedom. But all have the freedom in their hearts to do good and follow God. God gives us a certain number of days to make those choices.

Jesus said, ***"Don't worry about what you should eat, or drink or what you shall wear, can you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?...But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness."*** (Mt. 6:25-34).

The Bible teaches in Heb. 9:27 that ***"it is appointed for men to die once and then comes judgment."*** And in Romans 14:10: ***"For we all will have to appear before the judgment seat of Christ and we will all have to give an account for how we lived our lives."***

And when it comes to accountability, the Bible teaches that death is the great equalizer. Doesn't matter who you are, what you have done, where you're from, death comes to everyone. It makes us all equal before God. It sets the stage for a final judgment to which every person will be subject. And yet, so many people live their lives oblivious to this truth.

IT REVEALS THE ENORMITY OF OUR NEED

Finally, death reminds us that we are nothing without God and that we need God.

Let's face it, if we did not die and have to suffer sickness (for anyone who dies naturally is the result of some type of illness or malfunction in the body), why would you need God? Death not only reflects our sin, and makes us accountable; it is a glaring reminder that without God we're nothing. As Job said in Job 1:21: ***"Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I shall return."*** In fact, I believe many people first come to the Lord, or are apt to put a halt to the things that are wrong in their lives because of the prospect of death.

Now death should not be the chief motivating factor for following the Lord, but it is still a very strong reminder that all is not well and the status quo of life will end. And so death is

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meant to bring us back to the Lord. It is meant to point us to Jesus Christ, because it is only the Lord Jesus Christ who has defeated death.

THE ONE WHO HAS DEFEATED DEATH

As God incarnate, Jesus specifically came to earth not only to deal with this problem, but also to conquer it. Just as our Lord was victorious over Satan and sin, He was victorious over death.

Listen for a moment to these wonderful truths from Scripture.

Jesus said, ***"I am the resurrection and I am the life, whoever believes in Me shall live, even though he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die."*** (Jn. 11:25-26.)

Jesus said: ***"For God so love the world, that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him, should not perish but have eternal life."*** (Jn. 3:16).

"For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." (I Cor. 15:22).

"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus, our Lord." (Rom. 6:23).

Jesus did it all. He died in our place, He took away our sins, He rose from the dead, and He promises not only that all who put their trust in Him will live forever after death, but that He is coming back to establish His Kingdom once and for all.

We don't have to fear death, we don't have to let its sting overtake us. But it means putting our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the starting point.

Next week, we'll see why we can overcome the sting of death. We will look at the most beloved psalm in all of Holy Scripture, Psalm 23. Until then, may we never forget the purpose of death – it confronts us with the problem of sin, it holds us accountable, and it reminds us of our great need for God, for our need for salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ. In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, AMEN!