

Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity: September 20, 2020
“In The Face Of Death”

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text this morning is from our Old Testament reading, 1 Kings 17.

What do you do you in the face of death? The Old Testament text is full of precarious and dreadfully perilous situations. God uses Elijah to tell Ahab there will be no rain, or dew, except by the word of the Lord. This means there will be no moisture to sustain life, and no water to cool the burning tongues. No water meant no life, and no life means death.

After this bold word of death is spoken by Elijah, Elijah is kept alive and sustained by God’s gracious hand through God providing water for the brook Cherith, and God sending the ravens to bring Elijah bread and meat.

Months passed with still no water. Life in the dry, dusty climate got harder and harder. New difficulties arose. As relief seemed nowhere in sight, emotions run high, doubt looms heavy, and despair constantly nags. As the body wearily battles in these pained and unsympathetic conditions, the soul is driven ever closer to the edge of anxious turmoil and utter despair. As one looks around the arid ground, one can see death in every baked plant, and demise in every parched inch of ground. As the world around is dying, the soul easily turns into itself, “Well, everything else is dying. I must also.”

This is the situation to which Elijah is sent. There is a widow living in Zarephath. She is in a Gentile country, and somehow, by God’s grace, she has heard the word of the Lord and believed it. It is clear from the text that she does not yet call YHWH her God, but she has heard His Word and knows His messenger is coming. She believes in the promise of life to come in the midst of the death she is living.

The widow of Zarephath is a living example of our Gospel lesson. It would not surprise me to learn that Jesus had this woman in mind as He spoke these words in the Sermon on the Mount, “***Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?***”

Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?... For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.¹

This woman is gathering stubble to start a fire to bake bread with what little provisions she has left for her and her son. She doesn't know exactly what will happen after that, but it will more than likely be death. Look at with what faith she lives! She is content with this day's daily bread, and leaves tomorrow in the hand of God. If death be her portion after this meal, so be it; it is God's will. She doesn't know when she will die, but she knows that she will die at some time. She knows that in the midst of death God's Word is the only thing that will give life.

Elijah sees her working in the midst of death in order to die, and he calls to her, ***“Fetch to me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink.”*** Now, remember only God's Word is going to provide water, and so Elijah is making the connection for this woman that he is God's servant, sent to her just as God has promised. He doesn't look like much, but what he speaks is life-giving.

Then as she goes to fetch the water, Elijah has another request, ***“Fetch to me a morsel of bread in your hand.”*** What a terrible request! How can this man of God drive such a hard burden upon one who is clearly suffering? Should not Elijah have been serving this woman who is clearly in dire-straits? Is Elijah an egotistical, greedy, and obstinate man-child, or is there something else going on here?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, what does Psalm 23 sing, ***“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.***

¹ Matthew 6:25-27,32-34

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.²

In the middle of death, where this woman lives, the Word of God is sent to this Woman and she recognizes that through this man, Elijah, the still waters are present. In the middle of the valley of the shadow of death, God's Word of life is her comfort. The table is to be prepared in the midst of the enemies of death, sin, and the devil, and oil is not running out. Being a guest at this table means a cup that overflows, and now goodness and mercy will be my lot, and in the Lord's house will be the eternal home of those in Christ.

In faith, the woman hears the word of God through the mouth of this strange looking man before her, and she eats. The miracle of the text, the grace of the text, is seen in verses 15 and 16, "***she and he and her household ate for many days...according to the word of the Lord.***"³

Brothers and sisters in Christ, are we not in much the same situation? Death surrounds us on every side. Disease and decay are rampant in our bodies. It seems like if it is not COVID we are to be worried and thinking about, there is countless other diseases in which we are to be tested, and that's not including the chronic illnesses that take their own tolls. As the weather gets colder, we will have the reminder of dry and damaged skin due to what? The lack of moisture. We are told over and over, about how important it is to drink water so that the body doesn't dry out, because dehydration can lead to all sorts of problems, exacerbate others, and even lead to death.

The body isn't the only one to feel these effects. The family feels the breakdown of death and decay. Culture teaches us it's ok to not be married; in fact, it is financially beneficial to not be married. Death of relationships are ok, as long as the individual is free and happy. A life in the womb is ok to be taken, as long as the freedom to choose is maintained.

² Psalm 23:1-6

³ 1 Kings 17:15

Gender doesn't matter, it is up to individual choice. Little children growing up to know the difference between men and women, and how they are distinct, and different, and both are important, is something that is being done away with and replaced with what? Who gets to decide?

Look around to the world's ideas of family, of life, of joy. It is all limited to this world. Because the world does not see the life to come, it can only focus on what it sees and feels. When someone talks of faith, of things not perceptible to the eyes, it is met with scorn and ridicule, "Ok, sure, you can have faith if it makes you happy. You can go to church if it makes you happy. But if it doesn't, then why go?"

Happiness is the god of the world. If it makes you happy do it! The American Constitution has your back. It is built on the idea that everyone has the right to pursue their own happiness. This is the situation of the world, and it always has been, since the fall into sin. It hears words of death, but those words look good, and so we eat. We eat those things of death, and they are sweet going down.

Look around. The arid ground is filled with words of death of all kinds. The newsrooms and talk shows and convention halls are filled with words and words and, all the while, the houses of God sit more and more empty. In this physical and emotional climate, it is easy for the sinful nature to say, "Well, everyone is dying, I must also. We all have to die anyway; I might as well have fun doing it."

It is in this very culture, this very dry and dead, arid and unforgiving climate that Jesus came. God became man. He knows what it is like to look around and see nothing but death. Rome wasn't known for its strength of family values. While the governments were clashing with each other and with its own citizens, while struggles for power were being conducted in households of all nations, while children and parents were struggling against each other, while bodies were struggling to breath, while lives were fighting to gather sticks to make one more meal, while people were in despair, in other words, as death ravaged the land Jesus came. To the widow who was in the midst of death struggling to care for her son, Jesus came.

Who is that widow? The church on earth. Jesus came to the Church on earth and what did He do? He was baptized to fulfill all righteousness. He set aside all waters to be a blessed flood and a laving washing away of sin.

In your baptism, He joined you to Himself. In those still waters, He leads you, His sheep, to what? Behold, here you sit, and with His rod and His staff, He leads you to this very table of His own crucified body and His own shed blood.

A table is prepared for you, and you are anointed with oil. The English word *anointed one* is the Greek word *Christ*. Jesus was anointed for the special work of dying for the sins of the world. He died to defeat death. His blood brings life to you, and it is poured into the cup, overflowing into your mouth, as you feast on His goodness and mercy here, in the midst of death.

What a gracious God we have! As we live in the midst of death, with bodies that break down, He gives us sight beyond sight. He gives us ears to hear and life through His appointed means. To us poor, miserable sinners in dire-straits, not knowing when our last meal may be, or our last gathering of sticks, our last day of work might be, He provides us with heavenly food.

In His Holy Christian Church, God rules with grace. Faith sees this day our daily bread. The work is done. The food is set, and now she, the church, and He Christ, and her children, you and I, eat for many days. Tomorrow is not a worry, God is already there. We eat and lay down in peace. As a reminder, when we go to bed we make the sign of the cross and remember our baptism. This day has been given to us as a gift. When we wake up, as God's children, we know there are two places we can wake. In heaven, where there is no suffering, sadness, sickness, pain, tribulation, or death; or on earth, where we again pray for this day's daily bread.

In the morning, we again do what? Make the sign of the cross, reminding us that we are baptized. God is our Father. Christ is our brother. The Holy Spirit dwells in us, calling to our remembrance the words of Jesus, ***“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”***⁴

What does this mean? There is more to this life than what we see. While we see death, even here on the cross and upon the altar, faith sees life. Faith sees in this death of Jesus, death's defeat. Faith sees, “Fetch to me a morsel of bread in your hand,” and replies, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

⁴ Matthew 16:24–25

Faith receives the words of life from the lectern and pulpit. Faith receives this morsel of bread, which is the body of Christ, and eats. In the midst of death, faith eats and eats and sings,

“Throughout all their lifetime My people will prove
My sov’ reign, eternal, unchangeable love;
And then, when gray hairs will their temples adorn,
Like lambs they will still in My bosom be borne.”⁵ Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

⁵ How Firm a Foundation LSB 728:5

Prayer of the Church
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20 September 2020

Let us pray for the whole Church of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs. Heavenly Father, be gracious to us, Your baptized children who live in the midst of death. As temptations and anxieties surround us, lead us not into temptation or despair; rather, gladden our souls with the good news of Your Son's perfect life and sacrificial death for our salvation. Strengthen us in the faith, and fill us with Your Spirit, that we might trust in You for all things temporal and eternal. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, show Your abundant mercy to all those whom You have called to preach Christ and Him crucified. According to Your gracious will, give to the Church the eyes of faith to hear Your Word spoken through the mouths of men like Elijah. Grant faithful pastors to all vacant congregations, and restore to service those pastors without a congregation to serve. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, grant opportunities for honest and faithful labor to all, especially to the unemployed, and give us all contentment and joy as we carry out our daily tasks. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, grant wisdom to the president, the Congress and the Supreme Court of the United States; to the leaders of our states and localities; and to the rulers of the world, that they would seek peace, promote life and protect the weakest among us. Guard and protect those who serve in our armed forces and emergency services, that they may serve with integrity and return home safely. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, You have promised to send Your holy angels to guard and keep Your children. We thank and praise You for the gift of life and for the protection and care you have provided as *Ruth, Dale, and Cindy* celebrate their birthdays. Grant that they may grow in grace, continue to know Your loving-kindness, abide in the confession of Your care and protection, serve You faithfully all the days of their life and finally come to the fullness of Your joys in heaven; Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord God, Heavenly Father, we give thanks for the joy and blessings that You have granted *Pastor Travis & Gloriann, Joel & Danielle, and Nathan & Stephanie* during the years of their marriage. Assist them always by Your grace that with true fidelity and steadfast love they may ever honor and keep their marriage vows, grow in love towards You and for each other, and come at last to the eternal joys that You have promised; Lord in Your mercy; **hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, give ear to our prayers for the sick, the suffering, the lonely, the shut-in, the depressed, the dying and all those in any need [*especially Carmen, Susan, Randy, Marvin Karstens, Keith Teggatz, Mary Ann Teggatz, and those we name in our hearts*]. Be merciful and gracious to them, and strengthen them in their trials. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, as the widow, and Elijah, and the widow's son all ate bread together, grant that all who partake of Your Son's body and blood in the fellowship of this altar today would do so in repentance and faith, and to their abundant blessing for many days according to Your Word, spoken by Your Servant; Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, according to Your will, and in Your time, You call Your children to rest from their labors. Receive our thanks for those who have gone before us in the faith, and grant that we, who walk as yet by faith, may join them in their holy rest, until that day when You raise us incorruptible and immortal. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Into Your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in Your mercy; through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.**