

The Sign of Finality
Good Friday, April 3rd, 2015
Pastor Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. In spite of how often you hear to the contrary through movies and popular conversation, there really is *nothing* worse than death. And when people of various persuasions face it, the nervous and/or programmed responses include living in denial and/or repressive fear – to psycho-babble platitudes about death being “a part of life,” – to Navy Seal mind-over-matter discipline which exerts a mental refusal to die that while stretching human capability beyond reason, must nevertheless finally yield to mortality.

That is – and in this depressing consideration – death always wins. It beat all of the Caesars (even the ones who claimed the title “Lord and God”); it claimed Confucius, Gandhi, Joseph Smith, L. Ron Hubbard, Siddhartha Gautama Buddha, Charles Taze Russell, Mary Baker Eddy, David Koresh, Jim Jones, Muhammed...and as much as it makes me uneasy, it's going to claim Pastor Espinosa (unless Jesus comes first). I can honestly say that while my spirit resonates with St. Paul that departing this life is better by far (Phil. 1), that in my bare humanity that desperately tries to live, I don't want to die. I've used the analogy many times: It is like the child who *knows*...really *knows* that it really *is* ok to jump into the pool with dad right there to catch him or her with outstretched arms...you *know* all is well, but for some reason we just don't want to let go...we are still afraid to jump...this is why death remains an unsavory topic. I don't want to die. You don't want to die. We don't want to die.

I'm not speaking theoretically. One of my dear parishioners was genuinely frightened. She wanted to know as much as possible from the Word of Christ, what would happen...she wanted to know what she could expect. The same was true for another parishioner. We ended up conducting a thorough Bible Study. A third man who as a Ph.D. genius wanted to know what was true...I saw him go from intellectual agnosticism to deeply committed Christianity. He died smiling in response to the hope of the Word of Christ, but it was still tumultuous. Death exudes struggle and conflict. We want to die living out the confidence of faith, but even toward the end the good that we would, we do not do (Rm 7). The sinful flesh after all often spews its venom even while the most godly saints are dying.

There are of course exceptions to the rule when the grace of God permits us to employ the oxymoron “peaceful death.” Death itself, however, is an enemy. It was not a part of God's very good creation. It is an invader. It is a dark shroud and it is depicted as bringing sorrow, heart-ache, and overwhelming sadness. This is death. I don't want to die. You don't want to die. We don't want to die, even when our insane sinful flesh and the devil may tempt us to think that we do. Don't ever be surprised by that possibility by the way, because the devil's mission is

to destroy...he loves deception and he strives to make what is dark appear as light; and what is evil to appear holy; and what is wrong to appear right.

We will not deny the truth: death is our worst enemy.

But what can be done?

Everyone knows – even the most committed atheists – that the answer is “nothing.” Increasing longevity is no answer to the invader, and even if someone wants to argue against the article of the faith called “sin,” who will dare argue with the unavoidable stalker called “death”? You don’t need a degree in theology to intrinsically know 1) that death is bad; 2) that it comes unavoidably; and 3) that it arouses our worst fears.

The terrible fear and personal despair brought on by dying is richly captured by Bo Giertz in *The Hammer of God*: “The sick man lay with one knee drawn up. Beyond it only an arm was visible, an unnaturally thin and white arm reaching upward. It was crowned by an abnormally large hand with black pores in the rough skin and with cracked calluses. The bony and knotted fingers seemed to be grasping at something. They were thrust apart with wild intensity, only to close again to nothingness; they curled like the claws of a bird of prey and then opened again, ceaselessly repeating the painfully meaningless maneuver...[the pastor] moved a few steps nearer and heard his voice speak a timid greeting, ‘God’s peace be with you!’ The giant hand was lowered, and from the semi-darkness in the far corner a tortured face appeared, the whites of the eyes glistening. The eyes were wide open with terror, the hair was matted by the sweat of anguish, and the twisted mouth was like a black hole in which two yellow teeth were glimpsed. This is Horror itself, thought [the pastor], the anguish that ascends from the utter darkness of Chaos...[the pastor said again] ‘I wish you *God’s* peace, God’s eternal peace and blessing.’ The sick man shook his head. ‘Not for me! Not for me! Eternal damnation, punishment according to the measure of my sin, the judgment of wrath, and the everlasting flames – that is for me. To me He will say, ‘Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire!’” (pgs. 16-18) The pastor was overwhelmed and eventually left the room, went outside, and became sick to his stomach.

From the personal journal of Rev. Dr. Garth Ludwig while he was dying: “I have always been afraid of pain, of unpleasant events, of bad news. I call myself a dreamer, a searcher of truth and beauty. But is this so much a quest than as an escape from that which makes me afraid? I am locked into the challenges of my life. Truly I am in the valley of the Shadow...and damn it, I am afraid.” (Order Restored, 237)

But for us poor weak sinners who are so afraid in the valley of the Shadow, we hear another voice – not our helpless one – but the voice of our Savior: “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.” (Psalm 23:4) No one cares more about your stupendous burden that you bear than *Yeshua*/Jesus. Why take on our flesh? As eternal God He could never die, and yet – and here the mystery is proclaimed – He took on our flesh. Why? Because out of the greatest love He saw what was coming down on us. He saw that death was aimed to finish us, to destroy us, to end us. The sign of the cross is the sign of finality...because against all human comprehension, the truth is still the truth: God died and His blood was shed. There was a moment in history that the saying was true: “God is dead” and it was when Jesus breathed His last and said, “It is finished.” This was the sign of finality.

Even Christ was taken. And His disciples mourned and they were overcome with fear. Their worst fears had been confirmed. No one was at the end of the day a match for death. At least that’s what their senses told them.

But Jesus did not simply take on our flesh – becoming our true brother – so that He could sympathize (though that He did), but He came to do something about this enemy, this shroud, this invader, this nightmare. Enough was enough.

The cross bore out the sign of finality *not* because death finished Christ, but much to the shock and horror of Satan, the cross of Christ was the sign of finality for death itself. The King of kings chose to walk through the Valley of Shadow and His eternal light shoved all shadows aside.

I remember yet another dear sister in the Lord, Mary Ann Cota now in glory. Cancer was death’s ambassador for her, but as she held to the crucifix and held to her faith, her eyes said something that death could not deny: she would not die, but live.

The reason for her confidence while literally holding the crucifix was not coincidental: she knew that on the cross something beyond all wonder had occurred. Jesus entered death. A saving indestructible virus had entered the virus that had wrought destruction. Jesus died so that in entering the shroud as a willing victim, He would cover the shroud; He invaded the invader’s kingdom; He seeded life where death covered the land; He inserted light where there was only darkness. He changed everything about our facing death and just before He entered death, He prophesied what was in fact happening: *tetelestai*...it is finished! All that was required for death to die; to kill the killer, to bury the burier; to entomb the thing that entombs...Jesus’ cross became the sign of finality not for us, but for death! A great reversal took place at that moment.

And now I must confess the rest of the story: while it is true that I don’t want to die, I have to back up and reconsider the entire situation. Our Savior, our champion, our substitutional representative Lord Jesus siphoned all power out of our death. Our death has died, so guess what? I really am like the child who knows that my Father is “in the pool” with

His hands outstretched to me. And the truth is – just as all dads and moms who have taught their kids to swim know – when they finally jump they realize that all is well. In fact, all is better than well as they often get a big smile come over them! It is as if they are thinking, “Why was I ever afraid?!”

I say that I don’t want to die, but on account of Christ...TOO LATE! It’s already happened. He jumped into the pool for us and now death has lost its power...oh the flesh will still moan and sigh, but I’m dead, you’re dead, we’re dead, since our Savior died for us and then just to make sure we knew, He baptized us so that we would know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are indeed joined to His death. (Ro 6) Our death has passed.

This was why (I’m convinced) that my friend Mitch was smiling when he died; this was why my brother in Christ Mike wasn’t afraid; and this why our dear Gladys knew she was safe.

Our Savior cleared the way, the coast is clear. Death got beaten to death.

When our Lord said, “It is finished,” death became finished and now it’s all bark and no bite...it can’t keep the angels from coming to serve you even as you are brought into the radiance of your best friend *Yeshua*/Jesus.

We say these things because after Jesus proclaimed death’s finality, he spoke one last word: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Death’s grip was broken and it has been reduced to a portal leading Jesus’ train of children into heaven. Even death has been baptized into the service of God!

Death can only act as our stepping stone to life, not diminished, but into life increased; the invader has been reduced to God’s slave; the shroud has been ripped to shreds; the enemy has been deprived of all its weapons. This is why the martyrs died as they did...praying for their enemies...growing stronger and not weaker as death approached. In other words, our flesh may spew and tempt us to dance side-by-side at the pool side (hesitant to jump in). But nothing can stop your born-again spirit from knowing -- even if it is quiet and undetected when the time comes – that the weakness of our bodies does not depict the overflowing life in your soul. We know the Word is true: “Where oh death is your victory?! Where oh death is your sting?” (1 Co 15) Jesus finalized death...His cross was and is the guarantee.

Remember the desperate dying man and the pastor who got sick to his stomach? While the pastor was still outside a visitor arrived, a woman named Katrina. She went to the dying man and served him in a way that the young pastor could not:

Katrina: Do you have sin in your heart, Johannes?

Johannes: Yes...much sin, altogether too much.

Katrina: Just that should make clear to you that God has not forsaken you...Only he can see his sin who has the Holy Spirit.

Johannes: Do you mean to say Katrina, that it could be a work of God, that my heart is so unclean?

Katrina: Not *that* your heart is unclean – that is the work of sin – but that you now see it, that is the work of God.

Johannes: But why, then, have I not received a clean heart?

Katrina: That you might learn to love Jesus.

Johannes: What do you mean, Katrina?

Katrina: I mean, Johannes, that if you had received a clean heart and for that reason had been able to earn salvation – to what end would you then need the Saviour? If the law could save a single one of us, Jesus would surely not have needed to die on the cross. “Because the law worketh wrath,” and God stops every mouth by His holy commandments, that “all the world may become guilty before God.”

Johannes: Have you anything more to say, Katrina?

Katrina: Yes, one thing more, Johannes. “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.”

Johannes: Do you mean...? Do you really mean that He takes away also the sin that dwells in my unclean heart?”

Katrina: Yes, He atoned for all that sin, when He died in your place.

Johannes: But I still have it with me, don't I?

Katrina: Yes, as surely as Paul also still had it with him. Have you never read, “I know that in me (that is in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing; for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not.”

Johannes: Yes, that's how it is.

Katrina: That is the way it has always been for us, and for all others. “With his stripes we are healed.” “He is the propitiation for our sins; and...also for the sins of the whole world.”

Johannes: "One word more, Katrina, a sure word, and I will believe it."

Katrina: "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

Johannes: Amen. I believe!

Katrina: Now God's work has taken place. Now you must ask the pastor to give you the holy sacrament.

Johannes: Master, at thy word I will let down the net.

By God's grace we let down our net and then we hear His Word once again: "It is finished!" This is why Good Friday is good! This is why even if we are tempted to fear that we fear no more. Death was robbed of its victory...in the darkness of His death we find the light of life...yes, Good Friday...*Good* Friday...*Very* Good Friday means the threat of death is done. All that was necessary to bring life eternal was completed...His blood covering all your sin and His life invading death. Death, my death, your death, our death never had a chance.