

Romans 6: 2-11

Matthew 5: 20-26

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen+

In his novels “A Beggar in Jerusalem” and “The Town Beyond the Wall” the Jewish author, Elie Wiesel writes of unusual events and people seeking to find meaning and hope in war torn and ravaged Palestine. One of the oddest characters to appear in his stories is a broken, wandering, yet surprisingly wise individual simply known as “Moshe, the Madman”. He lives on the edges of society, and too often speaks prophetic truth about his compatriots and their actions in the world; about their willingness to settle for things ‘as they are’; about their missing the holy possibilities around them. He is one of those rare visionaries who see things others would rather not see. He is most often found after dark settling down on the outskirts of the town in the local cemetery, an area generally avoided by the town folk. For some reason they seem to fear the expanse of graves, perhaps because it is a reminder of their own destinies. One day a young person encounters Moshe, during one of his more sane moments, and asks, “Are you not afraid of living out here among these tombs”? Moshe replies, “It is not these dead that I fear. It is rather those who cling to, and go through the motions of living; who are dead already, but do not know it yet”. Moshe is speaking to an age that has lost its central connection to the source of real life, and has become rootless; delusional.

Today we hear the opposite echoed in St. Paul’s words. In this intricate passage he holds up for us the truth; “Do you not know that you who have been baptized into Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore, we are buried with him by baptism into death; so that, as Christ was raised by the glory of the Father we, too, might live a **new life**”. To put it in more common terms Paul is telling us that our autobiographies; the telling of our life stories and journeys, and our sense of our truest place in this world can only be found in belonging to the God who has co-joined us with his Son, Jesus. He is telling us that God has written a by-line—a motto describing exactly who we are. You have died and been raised with Christ!

Do not skip over that!! Why is it so important? Because Paul knew there are 2 voices speaking and giving directions to us in this life. The first says that we are moving in this world from life toward death; the other says we are moving through death toward life. One is driven by sin and leads to despair; the other leads to vitality, love, and hope.

Recently there was a knock on the study door and a young woman asked if she might come in and talk a little bit. That little bit turned into an hour and a half. She is bright and thoughtful and said she had been thinking a lot about faith and was very confused. “I don’t know what to believe anymore”; I hear so many different voices and conflicting messages. They can’t all be true, but I don’t know how to make my way through them. My friends tell me that I need to just be free and do what will make me happy, but then I look at them and see that they are as unsettled as I feel. I have tried that route and, frankly, it has not turned out so well”. We can understand her dilemma can we not? We too are bombarded by a multitude of voices and rhetoric championing this, or that, cause as the end all and be all of life. We listen to groups claim that freedom consists of having no bounds other than the ones we choose for ourselves, and that religious faith inhibits freedom. Underneath all the confusion and voices there really is

an assumption, often unspoken, and it is this; Life is moving toward death and the answer to the dilemma is to serve self as long as you can. But Paul says that is the sin, which is the problem and not the answer. It is the heart curled around itself, and it leads nowhere, except to emptiness and a sense there must be more. This is the situation to which Moshe, the Madman is speaking. Paul is unwilling to let us off the hook by prevaricating.

A number of years ago there was a cartoon about a little boy and his stuffed tiger; Calvin and Hobbes. The dialogue between them was often powerful. In one strip Calvin says to his father, "I have concluded that nothing bad that I do is really my fault". "Oh", says his father. "Right! Being young and impressionable, I'm the helpless victim of countless bad influences! An unwholesome culture panders to my undeveloped values and pushes me to maleficence. I take no responsibility for my behavior! I'm an innocent pawn! It's society's fault." Dad is totally unimpressed and says, "Then you need to build more character. Go shovel the walk." In the last scene, Calvin is shoveling snow and complains, "These discussions never go where they're supposed to go." Paul would say, "What did you expect"?

In the other corner of this struggle is a very different word; As God's own people we are moving out of death into life. In Baptism we have already died with Christ to sin, and are being set free for a deeper connection—serving God. Yes, it is true that sin still plagues us and reaches out to pull us back, but now we have the Grace to write our autobiographies from another point of view—God's. The Gospel according to Paul's reckoning is that Christ defeated death and sin not by clinging to life, but by going through death. When he tells us we are dead to sin, he is telling us that the only door leading to hope is to give up the belief that we can tinker a little with life and have things our own way. Walking the path of Baptism is to be willing to let die those things that have no future. It is a delusion to think that following Christ will prevent suffering and death. Instead it is by being linked to Christ's death and resurrection that we are saved. It is interesting that in the Greek the word for being buried with Christ means co-buried; an intimate connection. Apart from that participation there is no Christian life. The young woman I mentioned earlier is wondering if her 3 boys should be given Baptism and instruction or whether they should be allowed to just "decide for themselves" later. I suggested if that happens the decision will already be made for them. "What would they gain from it", she asked? The reply was, "The grace to know where they are headed and to Whom they really belong". In our Baptisms God is working to make past what ought to be past and creating the future that makes us new. Our disobedience, our hypocrisy, and our selfishness, all signs of death, are being placed in the past. Forget them! They have no future. What does have a future is life lived in and for God. Our love, small or large, has a future; our faith, even if weak and childlike, has a future; our hope, even when fleeting and without strength has a future, because they all participate in God's future for us. We are moving from death to life. But we need not fear dying to our brokenness; we have already experienced death which precedes life.

A number of years ago my mother was in a terrible accident. The details relate to someone running a stop sign and hitting the truck in which she was riding. Pronounced dead at the scene, the paramedics applied CPR and re-started her heart. She spent a lot of time at the Vanderbilt University Medical Center. Recently she told me she was not afraid to die. "Really",

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St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

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I asked. "What leads you to that?" I have already died and it no longer holds any threat. We have already died in Baptism and have been raised. We not fear the world, but we need to know what voice we will hear in this world. Amen.+