

The Triduum the three days,
Maundy Thursday and the Meal that signifies Christ's Passover from death to life, for our sakes.

Good Friday, suffering of Christ brings humanity's sin to light; exposing it so that it can be healed and forgiven by God.

Good Friday was also the night when the reality of Death sets in, for the disciples, as well as for us. And for those of us who have come to love the lord, his death is even more poignant in knowing that he dies for our sakes. A song by Ben Harper, a singer-songwriter, speaks of this desolation and grief that the disciple feels when they realize that their savior is dead.

Like the wings stolen from an angel
Like petals gone from a rose
Like a dove caught in a storm
Tonight he's in the Lord's Arms
The wind it blew straight through us
And whispered to me in tongues
I was told, I was warned
Tonight he would be in the Lord's Arms
Tonight he is in the Lord's Arms
So I drink this wine to him
With each glass, a memory
He left with his crown of thorns
Tonight he is in the Lord's Arms

And I take as my inspiration for tonight's message from this image. As we move from Good Friday to Holy Saturday, we now ask, what is it like to be in the Lord's Arms?

We don't know what the dead do in the Lord's Arms. Paul teaches that they are asleep until the end.

Nevertheless, we often talk to our blessed dead. We imagine them with us, like a presence. It gives us comfort to know that our blessed dead are with God, that in God's house, there are "many rooms" that Jesus talks about in John chapter 14, where our blessed dead have found a home while we wait for the end, that time when we will all be together, fully, eternally, in the presence of the Lord.

I have no answer for you in this regard. I am like you, sometimes talking to my blessed dead like they are with me, sometimes imagining they sleep in

holy rest until the Lord awakens us all to his eternal life in the resurrection, on the last day. What keeps me in the faith, and which gladdens my heart to think of it, is the hope that God is in full control of the relationship between death and eternal life, and thus that in the death of my loved ones, and even my death, God's eternal life rules. God gets what God wants in the end. And if Jesus can be trusted, when he assures me that I am valuable to God, I am loved, then I believe that is the case for everyone when they die.

But what happens when the one "falling into the Lord's arms", to use Harper's phrase, what happens when the one falling in the Lord's arms is the Lord himself? The church quickly developed the doctrine of Jesus descent into the realm of death, as it was variously imagined from age to age as the Greek idea of Hades or the Hebrew Sheol or Gehenna. In ancient times, people thought that the world was divided up into three tiers or realms; heaven, above, earth on our level of existence, and the underworld, below the level of the earth. The idea was that you were born into the world on earth, and then went in death to the underworld if you had been bad, and to heaven if you had been good. Some of Jesus' own parables use this conception to drive home a point about finding the proper motivation to do good, versus the tendency to do bad.

But Jesus' own death is different from regular death in one important way. Jesus' death is meant to accomplish something. And for Christians, as for all religious people who believe that there is something more than death, that something has to really fix things that are broken, or resurrection after death will not work. It was not enough for the early church that Jesus would simply die, then sleep in the arms of the Lord until Easter dawn. No, something has to be accomplished in order for resurrection to be worth it. And that something had to include God's justice. There were too many loose ends in the past of human history, too many frayed and tangled strands that had to be straightened out for Jesus to simply sleep in death for three days. For the early church, those loose ends had to do with the reality of all those people from the past who never had the opportunity to see the Gospel truth in Jesus, to hear his teaching, and therefore never had the chance to respond to the gracious offer of salvation through faith in Christ. For others, these loose ends had to do with the eternal fate of those people who were thought to be in hell, who had done things deserving of hell, but who had also been wronged themselves, who might be said to deserve some mercy too. Who could fix this mess? Who could rescue all of

humanity from the sin they commit, while doing justice to their victims and the circumstances in which they sinned?

Thus, two early passages of scripture mention Jesus' descent into the realm of the dead. The first letter of Peter 4:6 states that in Christ, "good tidings were proclaimed to the dead;" and in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, 4:9, says that Christ descended into the lower parts of the earth. Clearly, this was an early belief of the church, and there are other verses that seem to support this view. The church then came to confess this aspect of Jesus' ministry in death, when it included the phrase "he descended into hell" in the Apostle's Creed. So from an early time, the church confessed that when Jesus died on Good Friday evening, a) like all humans, he really died; and b) unlike all humans, he got to work in the realm of death to undo the power and work of the devil.

Now there is a long history of debate in the church about how significant this teaching of Christ's descent is to the faith. My purpose tonight is not to review all that. For Lutherans, ever since the reformation began, we have held to the basic doctrinal position as stated in the ancient creed. The Formula of Concord, one of the official confessional documents of the 16th century that articulated Lutheran positions on Christian faith, states, "We believe simply that the entire person of Jesus, (his divine and human natures), descended to Hell after his burial, conquered the devil, destroyed the power of Hell, and took from the devil all his power." (Solid Declaration, Art. IX)

What I want to emphasize for you tonight is the significance of this confession for our faith, and for how we live our lives with hope in God's full salvation. We haven't spoken of the devil much in our Holy Week observance, or in our Maundy Thursday or Good Friday sermons. But the idea of the power of evil is intimately a part of our faith, and of our understanding of what Jesus accomplishes for us in his death and resurrection. Whether we believe that the devil is real, or simply an abstract personification of evil, we can agree that evil is a powerful force in the world. Are there evil things that happen to people? Yes. Are there people who do evil things? Yes. Can political or social or economic systems be evil? Certainly. How does God judge evil in us and in the world? Conventional ideas about religion say that this is from the Bible, that God judges evil in people and then punishes them, or we might even say God judges evil people by consigning them to everlasting torment in hell. That

is, God sees evil, judges it to be against his will, and then punishes it. After all, that's what hell is for, right? And for the most part, we find comfort in this view because it supplies our worldview with a basic understanding of cause and effect, or Karma, or a system of cosmic justice. There are those who sin, and then there are those who really sin, and for us who have our ticket to heaven, we are grateful that we have asked for forgiveness. Those who do or make or participate in evil and are unrepentant, they are damned. It's a neat and tidy little system.

But this is unsatisfying as a system of belief, for we know more and more about what makes people tick, and that people are not in full control of themselves all the time. We know this about ourselves, for we know what it's like to try and change our behaviors for the better. But we are coming to know this about other people as well, people who seem to choose to do bad, or somehow can't help it. Thus the conventional religious idea of evil or the devil having control over people carries some weight. But as research and science continue to explain the grip that imbalances, or tendencies, or chemical abnormalities in the brain have on our behavior and thinking, we continue to gain knowledge about the problem of the human will. The will has now been forced to share responsibility in our view of human behavior with our own subconscious motivations, and the very mysterious ways in which our brains have been hard-wired, either from internal development or because of past experiences and environmental factors.

Think of what we now know about chemical or environmental exposures on brain development, traumatic experiences, early deficiencies, abuse or neglect, not to mention inherited tendencies, like mental illness and pathology.

Anymore, I can't find a way to fully blame people who commit heinous crimes, or who act sinfully as a matter of habit or obsession or addiction, for we don't know how much evil behavior is really shaped by our will power alone. In the past, before the real revolution in brain science gave us this new perspective, all of these powerful tendencies, habits, addictions, etc. are what we might have called evil, or the demonic, and that behind their mysterious power was the devil himself, causing humans to go against the will of god. Now, knowing what we know about the human brain, we need a different vision of who God is, for the god who would continue, despite this

knowledge, to judge sinful, evil acts by pulling the trap door under each offender as they fall into eternal damnation is a pretty heartless god.

Furthermore, a hell full of sorry souls whose will power wasn't up to snuff, couldn't possibly be satisfying because it implies a God who is ultimately powerless to do anything about the real bonds and captivities that people actually suffer from. Put in terms of the conventional language, what kind of salvation can we expect from a God who can't undo the Devil's hooks? Either that God is heartless, for he ultimately doesn't care about the details of human sin, or that god is truly powerless to do anything about it. And I'm sorry folks, but that god is no god at all.

But thanks be to God, for the God we believe in, the Lord of Creation, the deliverer of Israel, whose word goes out from his mouth and does not return empty, who redeems our life from the fiery furnace, has the power even in death, to descend to the lowest reaches of human experience, into death itself, and in that space of moral and physical desolation, actually open doors, break chains, and lift up those who have lost the fight against their inner demons. Thanks be to God, that Jesus is so committed to being the good shepherd, that he walks right into the clutches of the wolves that prey on all his lost sheep. At first, the wolf may even think he has won the victory, but the power of God's life, even in the clutches of death, overwhelms the powers arrayed against God. Christ can truly be called our champion, as Luther says in the first two verses of his famous hymn,

"A mighty fortress is our God, a sword and shield victorious; he breaks the cruel oppressor's rod and wins salvation glorious. The old satanic foe has sworn to work us woe! With craft and dreadful might, he arms himself to fight, on earth he has no equal. No strength of ours can match his might; we would be lost rejected, but now a champion comes to fight, whom god himself elected. You ask who this may be? The Lord of hosts is he! Christ Jesus mighty Lord; God's only Son adored. He holds the field victorious!"

So, brothers and sisters, raise the strain, sing your alleluias, for Christ has come for all, and all have been redeemed. The gates of hell cannot keep him out, for Christ tears the gates asunder, and brings heaven to the damned. Are there some who refuse this offer? Are there those who prefer the devil's bid? Perhaps for a moment, but can you imagine staying behind in your tormentor's lair, when your tormentor has been led away in chains? And what of those who deserve that punishment, whose acts have caused

mountains of suffering and grief? Isn't hell the justice they deserve? Not if God's will all along is for the justice of reconciliation, for it could be that true justice is victim and perpetrator, reconciled around the truth of their actions, in the eyes of God. Being forced to reconcile with their victims would mean to accept God's judgement on human evil, and also accept God's will for good. And you can't have such reconciliation without someone fetching the parties to bring them together. This is the work of Christ in his holy death. This is the work of Christ on this Holy Saturday. And If Christ has the power to open hell to heaven, then this points to one glorious truth, that in the end, God will get what God wants. Praise and glory be to God. Amen.