

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church - Watertown, WI

“The Bread of Life Raises”

Rev. David K. Groth - August 8, 2021

“Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst . . . *This is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day*” (Jn. 6:35, 39-40).

Paul says, “Death is the last enemy” (1 Cor. 15:26). Therefore we ought never regard it as our friend. We ought never think of it as a solution . . . to an inconvenient pregnancy, or to prolonged suffering, or to major depression. Death is the enemy, says Paul. Death is not natural. Death is not a celebration. Death is punishment, for “The wages of sin is death.”

As the enemy, death is always nearby, never too far away, always threatening, intimidating, bullying; always trying to make sensational headlines. Friends of death are genocide and starvation, violence and oppression. Friends of death are injustices of any kind. Picture the scenes. A woman addicted sells her body for drugs. A soldier rapes in the name of a false cause. In one country people throw away half their food, while in another country, children stare with vacant eyes and distended stomachs. Someone with money goes free; someone without resources spends years in prison. We see abortion clinics where mother and child both are sucked up in a culture of death. A tiny virus can take you down. A car accident can maim you for the duration of your life. War and death are best friends, but death and cancer are chummy too. Pain, sickness, injury and age, these are all allies of an enemy who uses all of them to put us in the grave.

Death is ruthless. It ambushes some and slowly saps the life out of others. And it will get you and me in the end. The death rate is still 100%. When death gets its hands on you, it tears asunder what God had put together: it tears apart body and soul. It tears apart marriages. It tears apart families and friendships.

We glamorize death in the media or show it on screens so often we are desensitized. We try to put a good spin on it. When someone has been sick for a long time and dies, with American optimism, we say, “Well that was a blessing.” No it wasn’t. Death is not a blessing. It is still the curse of sin. Death is not good. It is bad. Death is still the enemy, never a friend.

Nor is death a happy topic, so we hide death from view and try not to think about it or talk about it. We rely on funeral homes to make the body look good and try to keep it from decaying and returning to the dust from whence it came.

True, when we die, the souls of all believers go to heaven. The Scriptures speak very little of this, but it is a blissful rest in the Lord, a state of sleep in the Lord’s presence and under His protection. It’s a rest from labor and toil and pain and sin. But it’s also a time of waiting, waiting for physical resurrection. When our souls are in heaven, death is not yet fully undone because remember, our bodies are still back here, in the state of decay or dust. That needs to be remedied too. Paul writes the whole creation is groaning, as in the throes of death. “But not only the creation . . . we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:23). That’s our goal as Christians: the resurrection of the body!

Unfortunately, if you listen carefully, you’ll notice the resurrection of the body has nearly disappeared from American piety. Most people no longer think of the resurrection of all flesh as the goal. The hope of many Christians is simply to die and go to heaven. Leave this corrupt creation behind, leave our bodies behind, and go to be with Christ. We focus on the interim state of the soul. But the real goal, the Christian hope is the resurrection of the body on the last day.

The problem, of course, is we are still influenced by the ancient Greeks who thought spirit is good, but matter (everything physical) is bad. They thought our good and superior spirits were being held captive inside our inferior bodies. So, when you die, your better self, your spiritual self is finally released from the flesh that imprisons you and you’ll be a happy spirit in a spirit world. We’re still influenced by that. You can see it in those little memorial cards from the funeral home with sappy little poems on the back where it says something like, “Don’t weep for me. I’ve finally been set free.”

What rubbish! The death of our bodies is not our goal. To be set free from the flesh is not our goal. Our goal is the resurrection of the flesh. Our goal is to receive a new body and to live in the new heaven and the new earth. That won't happen until the last day.

In our text, Jesus says "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and *I will raise him up on the last day* (6:40). To be raised up by Jesus on the Last Day: that's our goal! And that's the promise of Jesus, the Bread of Life.

Our text today is a continuation of the Bread of Life discourse. Last week we noted Jesus is the only bread that truly satisfies. Every other hunger will return, whether it's for bread or happier home life. But He is the Bread of Life that truly satisfies.

In our text this week, Jesus is the Bread of Life that raises. He says, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever." "And I will raise him up on the last day." He is the Bread of Life that raises us from the dead. Four different times in this chapter, Jesus explicitly promises to raise His people on the last day.

The resurrection of the body is central to this text and to the Christian faith. We confess it in the creeds. "I believe in the resurrection of the body." And the Small Catechism proclaims, "On the Last Day Christ will raise up me and all the dead and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. *This is most certainly true.*" That's the goal of the Christian life: "the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."

So, Jesus, the Bread of Life, is not just for your spirits, but for your bodies. In stark contrast to the ancient Greeks, God loves and cares about physical matter. He created it, carefully, beautifully. Study any little part of creation and you'll see the care and attention and delight and creativity and wisdom he brought to it. At the end of the six days of creation, He surveyed everything He had made and called it "very good."

When the world was in trouble because of sin, He came down to redeem the world. He became flesh and bones to redeem your flesh and bones. Flesh must not be all that bad if the Lord Jesus became it. And He promises you are going to have a body in heaven! It's no trouble for God. He already gave you one, right? He can give you another. So the Last Day finds God not abandoning His creation but creating it anew.

Remember when Jesus rose from the dead? He appeared to the disciples, and Luke says, "They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it before them." On first glance that seems like an unnecessary detail, but it was actually to demonstrate an important theological truth. It shows He's not a spirit. He's not a phantom or ghost or dream or vision. He invites the disciples to touch him, then goes a step further, and eats a piece of fish. Neither Jesus, nor the Bible, is interested in a disembodied spiritual existence after death. Rather, even as Christ rose from the dead, He will raise us on the Last Day with new and glorified bodies. Paul writes, "We will all be changed, in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:52-57).

On That Day, justice will finally prevail, and all things will be made right. No more tears or hunger, no more thirst or pain, no more abuse, no more war or rape, genocide, or abortion. No more homelessness or addiction; no more COVID or cancer or even canker sores. Death's friends will no longer be able to wreak havoc on our bodies. On the last day, joyfully, wonderfully – no more death. No more death! Because Jesus will raise us up.

When someone has been very ill for a long time, we sometimes speak of him as being a shadow of his former self. But consider this: even when you and I are at our best on earth, we are mere shadows of our future selves in heaven. Because when we are raised, we will be raised imperishable. We will be raised with bodies like Jesus's own glorified body. We won't be raised with sore knees or lower back pain. We will be raised with glorified bodies, beautiful, strong, agile, healthy, vigorous. You have a physical future, with teeth and taste buds, fingertips and vocal cords and eardrums, with eyes that see and noses that smell the aroma of supper. Jesus did not save us *from* the physical world, but rather *for* a physical world.

But all this won't happen until the Last Day, not your last day when you die and your soul goes to heaven. It won't happen until *the* Last Day, when Jesus returns to the earth and raises up our bodies. "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then *at his coming* those who belong to Christ" (1 Cor. 15:22-23). That's why we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus. Come." Amen.