

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“Depart in Peace”**

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December 27, 2020

*“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples” (Lk. 2:29-30).*

What would it take for you to depart in peace? I’m not talking about exiting the worship service today, nor do I have in mind bidding good riddance to 2020. I’m talking about departing from this life. I’m talking about dying. What would it take for you to depart in peace?

Some would say their affairs must first be in order, such as having a last will and testament. Others would say they could depart in peace once they know their family is going to be ok; their daughter will have gotten her life back on track. Some would say they won’t be ready until they check off a few more items on their bucket list. What would it take for you to die in peace?

While it may seem a bit of a downer to focus on death so soon on the heels of Jesus’ birth, the hallmark of Lutheran preaching is brutal honesty, and to deal with our death is why Jesus was born in the first place. We have to be honest about death. Luther called our lives, “a continuous journey toward death. . . From the moment of our birth, we bring death into the world with us, bear it and drag it around” (WLS p. 364). So, let’s be honest about death today because everyone of us will have to contend with it, and because every one of us would like to depart in peace, like Simeon.

Mary and Joseph have come to the temple of Jerusalem for the rights of purification. According to Leviticus 12 this happens forty days after the birth a first-born son. There’s nothing unusual about the appearance of this family. No one’s wearing any halos. They’re just another poor family in a nation full of poor families.

Simeon has also come to the temple as he often did. Luke says he was “righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.” In fact, the Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not see death before he had seen the Messiah (v. 26). So, when Mary and Joseph come with Jesus, to Simeon it was clear as day . . . *this* infant was the one. Jesus was the promised Messiah. When Simeon took the baby in his arms he was amazed and overjoyed. He praised God, declaring, “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples.” Simeon knew this infant was God’s plan of salvation for the world. He knew this Jesus would save him and countless others from death.

Every living creature on earth recoils from death and tries desperately to avoid it. The rabbit runs desperately from the coyote, the mouse from the cat. Luther wrote “[but] our death is infinitely harder and more terrible than the death of other creatures, for we must also fear God’s wrath and judgment, which follow upon death and are eternal.” If it weren’t for God’s judgment we wouldn’t be too concerned about death. Again, from Luther: “To be sure, it hurts to leave wife and child, good friends, beautiful homes, and other things which one loves

here on earth. And yet it is nothing compared with the misery of knowing that we are sinners awaiting the judgment of God.”

Most people still believe there is a God, and most people also know they have not lived up to God’s expectations. But they don’t necessarily know Jesus, so they don’t have that hope, that assurance of forgiveness through Jesus. They struggle mightily in the presence of death. I’ve seen people die in peace, and I’ve seen people die in spiritual turmoil and chaos. It sure seems to me that faith makes the difference. Luther wrote, “The world reverses the song of Simeon and, when the last hour approaches, sings, “O God, I have not been Thy servant and now depart in unrest. My heart is troubled and sorrowful and does not know which way to turn. What I leave here on earth I well know. What I shall get there I cannot know and, besides, I worry about God’s wrath . . .” (367).

In contrast, when Simeon held the infant Jesus in his arms and in his heart, he praised God and said, “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace.” Simeon had been waiting for the Savior from sin and death, and the Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that Jesus was his Savior. He no longer needed to fear death or what comes after death.

This year death has intruded into our lives on a massive scale. 2020 has been a global wake-up call about the fragility of life. And contrary to so many memes, our hope is NOT in getting to 2021. Nor does our ultimate hope come in frozen little bottles, as thankful as we are for them. Even as we celebrate Christmas, the good news is that “Christ died for our sins . . . that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Paul wrote, “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins” (v. 15ff). “But in fact Christ has been raised.” Even during Christmas, the good news is founded only in the empty tomb. Jesus has so robbed death of its power that where faith is strong, death comes too slowly. Where faith is strong, one even begins to look forward to it. Paul wrote, “I desire to depart and be with Christ” (Phil. 1:23). J.S. Bach wrote, “Come sweet death.” And so many members here have expressed to me, “I want to go home.”

Having seen Jesus, the Messiah, Simeon says now finally he can depart in peace. The world will never know this peace or experience it. The world doesn’t even want to hear about it because it considers it folly. Departing in peace is the art of God’s faithful people.

Whoever has the Gospel and is baptized and receives absolution and partakes of the Lord’s Supper, why should he fear death? Regardless of when it comes, how it comes, or where . . . we belong to Christ and are therefore always ready.

We can think of death like going to bed. Sometimes after a long, hard day, we drag ourselves to bed utterly spent, depleted, exhausted. It feels so good to lie down and fall into a deep sleep. Jesus taught his disciples that death is something like sleeping. “Our friend Lazarus is asleep” he said (Jn. 11). He said so again when he told those who were grieving a girl’s death, “The girl is not dead, but sleeping” (Mt. 9:24). Since death is called a sleep, we know we will not remain in it. Luther writes, “It will seem as if we had just dropped off, so that we shall rebuke ourselves for having been appalled and frightened a so fine a sleep” (WLS 379). Indeed, the word cemetery comes from the Latin, *coemeterium* which means sleeping chambers.

We don’t need to fear death any more than we need to fear falling asleep, for whether we live or die, we belong to Christ. Neither the devil nor all the powers of hell can change the fact that Jesus is the Savior who has paid for our sin and reconciled us to God, overcome death and opened for us the door to life. Thanks be to God. Amen.