

**Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta**

**“This is the Lord for Whom We Have Waited” (Isaiah 25:6-9)**

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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Every autumn as the days get shorter and we approach All Saints’ Day, we are reminded of our mortality—reminded that no matter how smart or accomplished, how healthy or wealthy, how clever or wise we may be, one day we will die. In the classic 1989 film *Dead Poets Society* English teacher John Keating, played by the incomparable Robin Williams, admonishes his students, “We are food for worms, lads. Believe it or not, each and every one of us in this room is one day going to stop breathing, turn cold, and die.” How’s that for a pick-me-up beginning of a sermon? I am preaching about death today, but it is a gospel sermon which means we will get to life, so hang in there.

As a priest many times I have visited people on their deathbeds, listened as their breathing becomes labored, held their hands as they turn cold, and listened as they gasped their final breath. Each person I have visited on their deathbed has had their own unique demeanor and perspective. Some have been very peaceful and resigned, or very stoic and matter of fact. Some have been full of regret, others have cracked jokes. Some have been very afraid and apprehensive. Some have confessed things to me they had kept secret for years, hoping God will forgive them before it is too late (by the way, when it comes to God’s forgiveness there is no statute of limitations). Some have been joyful with anticipation of seeing Jesus face to face in heaven and being united with loved ones.

Like you, I have participated in funerals of many kinds—from large funerals with hundreds of people to intimate graveside services with a handful of family—from lavish ornate funerals with a massive procession to the cemetery to simple family services with the cremains of the loved one spread in the ocean or over the mountains. And like you, I have participated in funerals for people who died at very different ages—stillborn babies, teenagers killed in a car wreck, young adults who took their own lives, contemporaries who appeared to be healthy struck by a sudden heart attack, older persons who suffered for many years, on and on it goes.

Some people have a premonition about their death. Many years ago a decorated Navy veteran, an octogenarian was scheduled for heart surgery. He met with me a few days beforehand and told me he had a sense he was not going to survive the surgery, and asked if I would preside at his funeral if that were the case. After our meeting I walked with him to his car, and before he got in, he leaned on his cane, gave me a big grin, and thanked me for my time. And he was right; his funeral was less than a week later. Eventually, regardless of whether or not you have a premonition, one day the grim reaper will knock on your door.

During this pandemic in which over 200,000 Americans—and counting—have thus far died, the reality of death has become more acute for many. And death can appear so powerful, so final. Along these lines, after the development of the atomic bomb, one of the scientists who took part in the Manhattan Project, J. Robert Oppenheimer, famously quoted the *Bhagavad Gita*, “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” On the surface nothing seems stronger than death.

But the love God in Jesus Christ is stronger than death—as Jesus Christ himself proclaimed, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). The gospel is good news even in the face of death.

Seven centuries before Jesus’ incarnation one of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament, Isaiah, whose ministry in Israel lasted over fifty years—prophesied about this very aspect of the gospel. In fact, today’s passage from Isaiah is often read at funerals because it is replete with words of hope in the face of death:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained and clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation (Isaiah 25:6-9).

The gospel is never about what you do for God; the gospel is always about what God does for you. Notice all the things God personally promises to do for you in this passage. It starts with making food and wine—“On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines.” Apparently God is an Episcopalian (who knew?). Lest you think that is Old Testament hyperbole, remember that Jesus’ first miracle involved his turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana—well aged wine at that, the best wine for last (John 2:1-11). And at the Last Supper, after he instituted the sacrament of Holy Communion, Jesus promised, “I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom” (Matthew 26:29). What a feast that will be!

And Isaiah continues by prophesying that God “will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.” Death may very well be “the destroyer of worlds” but in his First Letter to the Corinthians the Apostle Paul assures us that “the last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Corinthians 15:26). Paul even cites today’s passage from Isaiah and proclaims, “When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: Death has been swallowed up in victory” (1 Corinthians 15:54).

And even after that God’s love keeps going, as Isaiah continues, “Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth.” Gently wiping the tears from someone’s face is an especially tender expression of love and care, and God promises personally to do just that for you. And again, lest you think this is just in the Old Testament, we see this in John’s vision of heaven in the last book of the bible, Revelation: “God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more” (Revelation 21:3-4).

And this wonderful passage from Isaiah also points us to the cross...did you catch the phrase Isaiah repeated? “On this mountain...on this mountain...” What mountain? Calvary, where Jesus died to atone for our sins and swallow up death forever—Calvary, where Jesus shed his blood of the new covenant, the well-aged wine of God’s love that is stronger than death. And as Isaiah prophesied, Jesus did this not just for some people, but “for all peoples”—including you.

And finally, Isaiah concludes today's passage with these beautiful words, "It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

Yes, death may mean that your flesh will one day be food for worms, but God's love is stronger than death, and after the resurrection your flesh will not be food for anything.

Yes, one day the grim reaper will knock at your door but scripture assures us that there is Someone Else knocking at your door (Revelation 3:20), Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life, the One who indeed "came that you may live, and have it abundantly."

Yes, death may be "the destroyer of worlds" but your Savior Jesus Christ is the Restorer of worlds. Jesus is the Lord for whom you have waited.

One more illustration and then I will close...in his moving book *Lion and Lamb: The Relentless Tenderness of Jesus* the late Brennan Manning recounts a true story that shows us what this looks like:

One of the many documented miracles that have occurred in Lourdes, France, took place in 1957. A French father took his ten-year-old son, blind from birth, on a pilgrimage from Brittany to Lourdes. At the shrine, the child begged his father to pray for him. His dad prayed aloud, "Lord, give my boy his sight." Instantly, the boy could see. He looked around. He saw flowers, trees, green grass, the open sky. Then he looked into his father's eyes, the eyes that went with the only voice he had known during ten long years of darkness. When he saw his father, do you know what he said? "Oh boy. Everybody's here!" (140-141).

And on that day we will all echo that young child, "Oh boy. Everybody's here"—and death will be swallowed up in victory and we will all rejoice together in the eternal feast prepared personally by the God whose love is stronger than death. And we will all echo Isaiah, "This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

Amen.