

“The Breath of Life Given in Death”

Luke 23:46

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Tonight, on this Good Friday, we fittingly close our series on the seven words of Jesus from the cross. Our Lord’s suffering has come to an end. As we discussed last week, the work is accomplished, and the world has been redeemed. Now, in the darkness of Golgotha, our Lord and Savior speaks these final words, “Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit,” and He breathes His last. The author and perfecter of our faith is dead. He has given Himself into the hands of His Father, whereby He might fulfill the final payment for our sin. The punishment of sin is death, and the debt we owe our righteous God for our sin must be satisfied. We ought to be the ones dying on that cross, but Jesus has taken our place, and has done so willingly. And as He breathes His last, we then receive the breath of life which He now gives.

You constantly, over and over again, have to battle your Old Adam as he rises up in an attempt to destroy you. That rebellious man wants nothing to do with Christ’s vicarious atonement. He would much rather add a few more nails to that cross to try and ensure that Jesus stays there and will not reach the glory of Easter morning. He is utterly contemptible and corrupt, and that is why you must by daily contrition and repentance drown him in the waters of your baptism. His only goal is the destruction of your holiness, the demolition of the righteousness which Christ hangs on the cross to freely give to you.

The old man breathes out death where there should be life. He endlessly seeks by the devil’s handiwork to pull you down to the depths of hell and separate you from the reality that God has saved you by the blood of His only begotten Son. He is an agent of the devil to weasel his way into your life and upend it every chance he gets. Jesus’ death is the only threat to his power over you, but by the blood of Jesus and for His sake, God has cast that worker of evil into the fiery pit. There he lies creating his schemes to convince you that you don’t need Jesus, and you don’t need his righteousness.

He is also working against to make you believe that not only do you not need that righteousness of Christ, but also that you are not worthy of it. And the terrible truth is that we don’t. We don’t deserve any of the Lord’s great kindness, because our sins have crucified His only begotten Son. We don’t follow His perfect Law, and we fail to be good Christian brothers and sisters to our neighbors. The devil wants you to believe that

this makes you belong to him, because covered in all that filth of sin and despair, there is no way God would take you as His own.

But take heart, dear friends, even in this moment mourning over the death of our Savior. He hangs upon that tree for you. He commits His soul and spirit to the Father for you. He knows that His Father in heaven has all things in His hands, and so He has all things in His hands for your benefit as well. Yes, the Old Adam within you writhes and squirms to prevail over the new man you have become in Christ. And so you must continually bury him in the flood waters of your baptism, for as the Apostle says in 1 Peter 3:21, “Baptism...now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

Baptism is the means by which the benefits of this night are appropriated to you. Jesus Christ died on the cross in utter darkness and despair, and just the same way you were brought to the font by the urging of the Holy Spirit in darkness and despair, that you might commit your spirits to the care of your Father in heaven. There, in those blessed waters, you were given the breath of life by way of Jesus’ death. Paul says in Romans 6:3-4, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” You are called according to the death of Jesus to be made new, to rise up from the drowning waters of baptism as one who is united with Christ Jesus.

The blood He now sheds is the price that was paid for your righteousness, a righteousness which you only have because He has willingly given it to you. And as you embrace the truth of that blessed gift, you continually are called to live a life in accordance with that baptism. Sin is the reason we have come to this day of our Lord’s death, and it is the only reason for which He had to be incarnated. When you bury your Old Adam, drowning Him in the baptismal waters, it means something. It is not a mere sign or symbol of your faith; it is the essence of it. Luther writes in the Large Catechism:

Therefore the old man goes unrestrained in his nature if he is not checked and suppressed by the power of Baptism. On the other hand, where men have become Christians, he daily decreases until he finally perishes. That is truly to be buried in Baptism, and daily to come forth again. Therefore the external sign is appointed not only for a powerful effect, but also for a signification. Where, therefore, faith flourishes with its fruits, there it has no empty signification, but the work [of

mortifying the flesh] accompanies it; but where faith is wanting, it remains a mere unfruitful sign.

As those who have faith in Christ—faith in the atonement He has purchased and won for you on that bloody cross—you are able to drown that old man. He seeks to drown you right along with him, and if you are not practicing your faith, then he will succeed. And I am not talking about good works. Practicing your faith is not obeying the Law. Practicing your faith is believing that Jesus Christ has done all that is necessary to redeem you, a person who was lost and wandering in this wasteland of sin, and has now been plucked out of it by His mighty hand. By His blood you have been made to be holy, and by His blood and His blood alone can you remain holy.

You will come forward in a moment, humble and contrite as a beggar in need of forgiveness. And the only medicine for your ailment, the only treasure that will assuage your poverty, is the body and blood of our dear Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ—the man who upon that tree of his shame has breathed out the final breath of His life, that you might receive the breath of life given in His death. There He atones for all of your sins, and by the work of the Holy Spirit you must now battle at your Lord’s side. He has called you to be His, and only by His great mercy you are His own dear child. Despite your failures and the sin of Adam which placed the Son of God upon the cross, He has forgiven you of every one of those sins. What a treasure to have in the midst of our mourning as we gather here to remember the sufferings of our Lord.

On this night of grief and shame, we honor the One who gave all that we might have His eternal inheritance, instead of the deadly inheritance of sinful Adam. As Paul says in Romans 5:

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned...therefore as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.

You have been given the greatest of all gifts in the death of Jesus Christ—that you have been made righteous on His account. And this righteousness, while free to you, was earned by the stripes of the Godman who was beaten, scourged, and humiliated for your sakes. By His death, you have been given the breath of life. As the Lord commits Himself to His Father, you are assured that He is pleased with Jesus’ sacrifice, and that all is atoned for by way of His Son. No greater assurance can be given than this, and by His body and blood, of which you will now partake, He has won for you forgiveness and life.

And though His body hangs lifeless on that accursed tree, it will not remain so. For you now look with reticent hope and anticipation of the joy of the third day, because the bonds of death cannot hold the very Son of God, your Savior, who, bloody and beaten, has borne the cross of death for you all. Amen.