

4.3.2022 Passion Sunday (John 8:46-59)

The day of my great-grandpa's funeral is a moment in time that I'll never forget, and one specific memory from that day stands out like no other. I was a nine year old kid, wandering around this sea of adults, when my grandma took me by the hand and led me to the casket where the body of her father laid motionless. She took my fingers, pressed them to his forehead, and told me (in no uncertain terms) that my great-grandpa was dead.

I don't remember much about being nine, but I can recall that moment more vividly than most of what happened yesterday, and at different times through the years I've thought about standing there with my grandma, listening to her tell me that great-grandpa was dead, and for a very long time I thought what she said to me about him was true, that he was dead, but I'm no longer convinced. I believe she was mistaken, in much the same way that the Jewish religious leaders were wrong when they said to Jesus, "*Abraham is dead... and the prophets are dead...*" (John 8:52-53).

In the Gospel passage we read this morning, these men claimed that Abraham was dead, but at another point in the Gospels, when Jesus was speaking to the Sadducees about the Resurrection, He spoke of Abraham in the present tense, when He said to these men, "*You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God... have you not read what was said to you by God: 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living*" (Matthew 22:29-32). The Jewish religious leaders claimed the *prophets* are dead, but on the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter and James and John saw two of those prophets, Moses and Elijah, speaking with Jesus (Matthew 17:1-8). *He is not God of the dead, but of the living.*

In the passage we read today, Jesus boldly declared, "*Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word, he will never see death*" (John 8:51). The thought I would ask you to consider as we contemplate such a bold declaration is the vast difference that exists between what I saw as a nine-year old, what we've all seen, the death of the body, and what our Lord was speaking of here, something infinitely more terrifying, the death of a soul.

To illustrate the immeasurable difference between physical death and spiritual death, let's go back to the Garden. In the second chapter of Genesis, we learn that God took Adam "*and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die*" (Genesis 2:15-17). As we consider the difference between the death of the body and the death of a soul, it's important to note the time specified by God in this verse. Remember, God told Adam, *in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die*.

Well, Adam ate from that tree, and since God said in that day you shall surely die, the skeptic might point out how much Adam was able to accomplish after his death, for as you know both he and Eve ate (Genesis 3:6), then "*hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God*" (v. 8), were expelled from the Garden (v. 24), and the book of Genesis lists their descendants to the time of Noah (Genesis 5). So, did Adam die in the day he ate from that tree? Did God mean what He said, *you shall surely die*, or is this merely figurative language?

Listen to the way the Message translation of the Bible presents us with that text, and ask yourself, does this sound like figurative language, or did God literally mean what He said? In that translation of Genesis (2:16-17) we read, "*God commanded the Man, "You can eat from any tree in the garden, except from the Tree-of-Knowledge-of-Good-and-Evil. Don't eat from it. The moment you eat from that tree, you're dead."* Adam and Eve died when they, with full-knowledge deliberately disobeyed the command of God, because as St. Paul stated, "*the wages of sin is death*" (Romans 6:23).

Not may be, or will be, the wages of sin *is* death, because God is the Author and Giver of life, and therefore to knowingly and deliberately separate ourselves from Him through disobedience to His word, is to separate ourselves from the only Source of life. This is what happened in the Garden, and since we still, as we confess in the liturgy, "from time to time... by thought, word, and deed..." sin "*and fall short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:23), we combat those deadly offenses by His grace through repentance and

humble confession.

As Anglicans, we privately confess our sins daily in Morning and Evening Prayer, as a church body we publicly confess our sins weekly, and we do so fervently not because we are the most “miserable offenders,” but instead, as children of our first parents we know that we aren’t perfect, and imperfect people often need to confess and repent in order to restore a relationship. How often is this the case in our relationships with one another? When we knowingly hurt someone, we confess, we repent, we ask to be forgiven and for the relationship to be restored, and if this is how we navigate finite, human relationships then no doubt it is infinitely more important to humbly confess, repent, and ask God to “*forgive us our trespasses*” (Matthew 6:12), and keep us in His friendship.

The infinite importance of confession for spiritual life and relationship with God is spoken of by St. John in his first epistle. There he wrote, “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us*” (1 John 1:9-10). These verses proclaim God’s faithful promise to forgive and to cleanse the person who approaches Him in humble confession, and these words also speak to the person who pridefully believes they have no sin to confess. To that person, this Scripture presents the dire warning that you’ve deceived yourself (vs. 8), you’ve made God a liar, and His word, His Truth is not in you, because God’s message of love to the world, which is written in the precious Blood of His Son, is based on the fact that we are *all* imperfect, that we *all* need a Savior, and that God sent His Son to die a physical death to the end that all that believe in Him should not die a spiritual death, but instead, pass from the death we earned to God’s gift of life everlasting (Romans 6:23; John 3:16; 1 John 3:14).

The Jewish religious leaders said to Jesus, “*Abraham is dead... and the prophets are dead...*” (John 8:52-53), but our Lord disagreed. He declared, “*if anyone keeps My word, he will never see death*” (John 8:51). He proclaimed, “*I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever*” (John 6:51). At the grave of Lazarus, He said to Martha, “*Everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die*” (John 11:26). The grave may still be dark, but death has lost its sting (1

Corinthians 15:55), for our Savior Christ “*abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel*” (2 Timothy 1:10). Now those who keep His word, eat His Bread, and believe in Him will never suffer that which makes death truly death: We will never suffer separation from God. By His grace may we live with the blessed assurance that “*neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Romans 8:38-39).