

Ashes, Ashes, We All Fall Down

a sermon by Rev. Heather Thomsen Tang on John 11

Ash Wednesday, 2020

What are you afraid of? What makes you feel that panicky, terrified feeling? On the surface, most of us could tick off a few answers pretty quickly, like spiders or birds or snakes. But on a deeper level, what are you afraid of? What keeps you awake at night? What brings a sense of stress or anxiety or even dread into your life?

Davin and I have a five month old daughter named Ellia. In January, we moved Ellia out of our bedroom and into her own bedroom. Many of you know, from your own experiences with babies, that newborn babies are supposed to sleep on their backs to help prevent Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. But doctors advise that once babies can roll over on their own, it's safe to let them sleep in whatever position they choose. So, since Ellia can roll over, Davin and I took her out of a safe-sleep bassinet and transitioned her to a crib. One of the very first nights she was up in her own room, and I remember checking the video monitor to find her not just belly down, but actually face down, like she was eating the crib sheet. Convinced that she was suffocating, I rushed upstairs. Though her nose was a bit smashed into the mattress, she was breathing just fine. I turned her head sideways to give her a clearer airway, and returned downstairs to go to bed myself. But when I checked the video monitor again, there she was, face smashed down in the mattress. You can probably guess what happened the rest of that night. I don't think I slept more than an hour or two, because every time I checked the monitor, she was face down in the mattress. I made several trips upstairs, to no avail. Every time I turned her head, she just turned right back down into the mattress. By God's mercy, we made it through the night – Ellia did not suffocate and I did not die of anxiety. When my rationality returned the next morning after a shower and some coffee, I realized that the sleepless night and constant monitor-checking had revealed a deep-seeded fear: I am afraid that Ellia is going to die in her sleep.

The fear of death pervades our culture. Think about it: Seat belts, speed limits, and traffic signs all exist to protect people against needless death. We spend hours at airports being scanned and searched for weapons to protect people against needless death. In the world of medicine, we are continuously developing new methods to treat, cure and prevent diseases: we vaccinate children, we operate on weak hearts and other body parts, we perform radiation on cancer all for the purpose of protecting people against needless death.

Don't get me wrong: I am not saying that any of these measures are bad. Quite the contrary: laws, regulations, safety precautions and medicine exist because human life in all its shapes, forms and stages, is so precious. Human life is a gift, and seeking to preserving it is a good thing. But life is also the Lord's alone to give and to take. And it seems that much of our desire to preserve life is accompanied by a deep-seated fear of death that compels us to try control circumstances that are not ours to control.

Perhaps we come by our fear of death honestly, passed down from generation to generation. In the ancient world, and even as recently as only a few hundred years ago, death was a powerful force against which humans were usually impotent. It is no wonder we humans are afraid of death.

The apostle Paul, writing to the church in Corinth said, "the last enemy to be destroyed is Death." Paul seems to be personifying death as an actual enemy who seems quite threatening. In Greek mythology, death was personified as a god named Thanatos, which literally means "death." In the recent Marvel movies, the villain Thanos is riffing off this personified death figure from Greek mythology. Here in our scripture passage from John 11, the gospel writer seems also to employ imagery of capital D-Death as a powerful and deadly enemy.

Death looms large in the background of John 11. As the story unfolds, we can almost see the hooded figure slowly approaching with its head bowed. Death is powerful. And as we shall see, everyone in the story feels the eerie proximity of Death. For the disciples, for Marth and Marya, for Lazarus, and for their community in Bethany, death looms.

Early in the narrative, Jesus learns that his friend Lazarus is ill. So Jesus decides to return to Bethany, Lazarus' home town, which was in the region of Judea. The reference to Judea is significant, for the Jewish leaders there have tried to arrest or kill Jesus on multiple occasions in John's gospel. This is why the disciples say, "Rabbi, the Jewish opposition in Judea have tried to stone you, and yet you want to go back?" The disciples seem shocked by his decision, because Jesus' return to Judea means risking his own life, and possibly the disciples' too. The hooded figure of Death looms behind Jesus and the disciples here. As they approach Judea where the authorities are apparently out to get them, it is no wonder the disciples are afraid.

The narrative progresses, and Lazarus dies. Lazarus' death symbolizes the frail mortality from which humans cannot escape. Of all the uncertainties that swirl around human existence, death is the one certainty. All people die. As the old nursery rhyme goes, "ashes, ashes, we all fall down." Here in John 11, Death has clutched Lazarus in its shadowy grip, and Lazarus has fallen down under Death's power. Lazarus' sister, Mary and Martha, and the Jewish community in Bethany are stricken with grief. As these friends and family gather to mourn, we imagine the dark, hooded figure pacing amongst the crowd at Lazarus' tomb. Mary, Martha, and even Jesus begin to weep. The text says that Jesus becomes deeply troubled, which appears in other translations as moved in His spirit, angry, distressed, or disturbed. Jesus seems to be angered by Death itself, disturbed by this enemy that terrorizes God's good world. In this moment, it seems that even Jesus is acknowledging Death's power, and He grieves because of it.

Here at the tomb, Death is waving its victorious flag. Lazarus lays lifeless, four days without breath in his lungs, the sour fragrance of mortality wafting around his bones. If this story took place today, the tragedy of Lazarus would hauntingly reveal that the seatbelts, speed limits, and safety precautions didn't work. The treatment plan and the latest medical advances failed. In the words of Mumford and Sons, Death is just too full and we, like Lazarus, are so small. We, like Lazarus, are too feeble to stand against its power. It is no wonder we are afraid of Death.

There are areas in each of our lives in which the power of Death looms. Perhaps you see Death waving the dark flag of victory after the passing of a loved one, or in a difficult diagnosis, the loss of a job, or the fracturing of a relationship. Maybe you, like the disciples, are stricken by the fear of Death's looming power. Maybe you, like Mary or Martha, are stricken by grief. Maybe you, like Lazarus are being stricken by Death itself – your body aching, twisting, even decaying. Death wreaks havoc on our lives and brings horror to our world. It is no wonder we are afraid of death.

But here, at Lazarus' tomb, is where the story pivots. Here at the grave – the symbol of Death's triumph and the throne room of Death's domain - the power of this greatest and last enemy is turned on its head. Jesus lifts his eyes in prayer to the Father, and shouts: "Lazarus, come out!" As Jesus' words echo, we imagine that the chains of mortality binding Lazarus suddenly break apart. The death shroud slips from his body, and the stone covering the lifeless chamber is pushed away. Lazarus steps out from the stale darkness of the tomb and his lungs fill with the sweet air of life. He blinks in the sunlight. Lazarus is alive. The grave is emptied of its triumph. Here in John 11, Jesus has assaulted Death's dominion, and He has won. Jesus demonstrates mastery over the dark enemy who masters us all.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus' power over death has grave implications for our relationship with death. Grave implications, indeed. John 11 shows us that a Christian's relationship with death should change because of Jesus' power over it.

How does our relationship with death change when we follow Jesus? Most simply put, my relationship with Jesus means I do not need to be afraid of Death. When we follow Jesus, we need not grasp at other things to create an illusion of safety. Instead, we are invited to trust in the One who is more powerful than death.

Here's what I mean by that. We place so much hope in anything and anyone that promises to protect us from harm. But that's all just hype and false advertising. Nothing in this world can protect you from death. At most, your feeble attempts at the illusion of safety will only delay Death's inevitable reckoning. We all feel the eerie proximity of Death.

I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. And yet it's amazing how quickly we place our hope in anything that will give us the illusion of safety. During Ellia's first nights upstairs in her crib, I clung to my belief that the doctors knew what they were talking about when they said it was ok to let a baby her age sleep into whatever position was comfortable for her. I clung to my hope that the crib was made according to safety codes. I clung to the video monitor, trusting that I would spot something wrong if I was attentive enough. In those moments, I was not trusting Jesus with Ellia's life. I was trusting my doctor, the crib, the monitor, and especially, my own ability to control the outcome.

Where is Death looming in your life, inducing that fearful, panicky feeling? In what areas of your life are you tempted to grasp for control over the threat of death or harm? Maybe when you think about your family and your home, you are tempted to place your hope in your security system, your locks, or even your weapons. Maybe when you take your daily prescriptions, you are tempted to trust in those pills as a protection against death. Or maybe you trust in your ability to exercise and eat healthy as a way to ward off death. Don't be lured into placing your trust in these things. There's only One who is worthy of our trust in this deepest area of fear. His name is Jesus.

Jesus' power over death means we do not have to be afraid of it. And the key to unlocking our fear is found in vv. 4-7. Let's read those verses again: When he heard that Lazarus was ill, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." ⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, ⁷ and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

To many of us, this makes no sense. If you love someone who is dying, wouldn't you rush to their bedside to do anything you can to help? But Jesus stays put. And here's the game-changer: He does this so that God will be glorified through Him. Jesus knows that Lazarus's death will be used to reveal God's glory. In staying put, Jesus is showing the disciples, Mary, Martha, the Jews in Bethany, and us as readers, that Death does not have the final say. Death is not the end-all, be-all before whom we bow in fear. Jesus shows that in life AND in death, God is more powerful. God's power through Jesus is so immense that this dark, threatening enemy that has terrorized humanity from the dawn of time is revealed as merely a pawn through which God's glory is seen. Even in Lazarus's death - in fact the text seems to suggest - BECAUSE OF Lazarus' death, God is glorified.

This story in John 11 is not just about Lazarus' death. It is also about Jesus' death. At the end of the chapter, we learn of the Pharisees' plot to finally do the deathly deed against Jesus. In going to Judea to call Lazarus from the grave, Jesus sets in motion the Pharisees plot to kill him. His miraculous action of bringing life to Lazarus will ultimately bring death to himself. But he is not afraid, because he knows that through all of this, through Lazarus' death, and especially through His own, God will be glorified. The grand irony is that what brings death to Jesus brings life to the world. At the end of the chapter, Caiphas the Pharisee's high priest, says that Jesus' death will be "better" than the destruction of a whole nation. What he doesn't realize is that Jesus' death will be "better" in ways Caiphas can't even imagine. Through Jesus' death, God will be glorified. God's triumph over that terrible enemy, Death, will be secured as Jesus' life pours out for all the world.

In all of this, we see that Jesus' power should bring about a change in the way you and I view death. My relationship with Jesus should orient me to value God's glory even more the fear of death, because Jesus has proven that death does not have the final word. No longer should safety be my most primal motivator. Rather, God's glory should be. I do not need to be afraid of death, because even in death, God's purposes can be accomplished. Out of death, God brings forth new life, and in this His glory is seen.

In this Lenten season, we, like Lazarus, must experience the reality of our own death. We must relinquish the illusions of safety to which we cling and acknowledge that Death's power is not ours to control. But, on this Ash Wednesday, we also proclaim that Death does not claim final victory. Even as we receive the ashy mark of the cross – that ultimate symbol of death - we also remember that Jesus' body is not still nailed to the cross. The cross, like the grave, is empty.

Because Jesus has proven Himself victor over the grave, your life and your death, and ultimately, Jesus's own death and resurrection life, reveal God's glory. What a wonder it is! We do not need to be afraid. So let us walk with courage toward that powerful, and yet ultimately powerless, place of death. And there we shall see God's glory revealed. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Let's pray:

Tonight, Lord, we acknowledge that Death is indeed so great a foe, claiming every last one of us for its shadowy home. The forcefulness of Death's power inflicts sting upon sting on our frailty. And yet, there is One who is greater still, One who conquers the power of the grave.

Where, O Death, is your victory? Where, O Death, is your sting?

Christ, You are so great a victor! Your life crushes the clutches of death. Your light vanquishes the shadows of the grave. By dying, O Christ, You destroyed our death; by rising, You restored our life. May we find our lives in You today. Amen.