**“Die and Rise”**

Romans 6:3-11 Rev. Clinton G. Roberts First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest January 23, 2022

Many years ago on a lazy summer afternoon, three friends, reunited after their freshman year at college, went canoeing down a wide, deep river. There were a number of check-dams along their route, most of them emptying onto a shallow concrete shelf. The young men quickly adopted the routine of lifting the long canoe over these check-dams with one below and two above the falls.

That is, until they came to the fourth check-dam. This dam was different: there was no concrete shelf below it. The full force of the river poured over and down, forming a foaming, roaring vortex at the foot of the dam that acted very much like a front-loading washing machine. But this time it wasn’t clothes going ‘round and ‘round. It would soon be them.

One of the young men leaped down first, only to be surprised by going in right over his head. He struggled mightily to swim downstream but kept on getting pulled back and down, back and down, until it became evident to the other two that he was in real trouble.

At that point, the second man jumped off the dam’s top to assist him. A trained life-guard, he attempted to swim his friend free of the vortex using a cross-chest carry. But the second man couldn’t do it. Again and again and again, they were both pulled back and down, back and down, rising to the surface for only a couple of gasping breaths before being slammed down again—and held down—for close to a minute each revolution.

As the second man began to weaken and struggle to save his own life, the canoe itself began to roll and slam against the waterfall. It smashed into his head, stunning him, and he let go of his friend. Moments later, he too was pushed violently downward, where in the half-light, he saw friend lying motionless on the riverbed, eyes wide open. But then, as the second man struggled vainly toward the surface for one more gasp of air, a hand reached down through the water: a hand that closed over his arm with a grip of steel.

That second man was me. And the title of this sermon is “Die and Rise.”

I

The Letter to the Romans is Paul’s longest epistle, and it represents his greatest effort to set forth in a systematic way the full dimensions of the Gospel: how Christ Jesus came to free us from the power of sin and death.

As sentient beings, we can perceive both good and evil, yet we do not always choose the good. And even when we do, we find that we cannot fully achieve it. And so we find ourselves held captive: enslaved to the power of sin within us—and at work in the world.

Jesus came to change all that. And the change is confirmed through our baptism. In the 6th Chapter of Romans, he addresses the problem of sin in a profound and paradoxical way. “Do you not know,” he says, “that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?”

On any given Sunday, when we are celebrating the baptism of a little child, I’m hoping that “dying” isn’t the first thing you’re thinking about. We rejoice over the gift of that little child and the promise of God’s grace poured out like a benediction over all the years to come, as we baptize that child in the name of the triune God.

Water is a necessity for life. If you’ve ever had to go a long time without it, you know just what I mean. But water can also be deadly, as the sad events on the islands of Tonga revealed last week…and as all of you know who have ever ventured to swim in the ocean, only to be pulled down by the undertow or body-slammed by a breaking wave.

Water is powerful. In ancient times, the sea was seen as the realm of death. In the Book of Jonah, Jonah is carried down by the whale into the watery regions of Sheol, whose bars like a prison close over his head. The waters of death have overwhelmed him, yet his prayer still reaches the ears of God. And because nothing is impossible with God (who in Christ has thrown open the gates of hell), God speaks to the whale and Jonah is brought back to the land of the living. What is his response? *“You have brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God…Deliverance belongs to you!”*

What Paul is saying in Chapter 6 of the Book of Romans is that, through our baptism, we are incorporated into Christ Jesus himself. The phrase “in Christ Jesus” is of supreme importance to the theology of Paul. “If anyone is in Christ,” he says in 2 Corinthians, “there is a new creation.” The past, with its burden of sin, is over. Guilt is removed, and its punishment expiated. This is the grace which a life “in Christ” will bring us.

In verse 5 of our passage, Paul says, “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” The word used here for “united” is the same as “engrafted.” We’ve been “engrafted,” says Paul. All you gardeners and wine enthusiasts out there will know how telling a metaphor for our life in Christ that word “engrafted” really is. Like a new branch on an old vine, we are rooted and grounded in him. We drink from his taproot. We bear fruit meant to be a blessing. *“I am the vine,”* he said to his disciples, *“and you are the branches. Cut off from me you can do nothing*.” But what does it really mean to “be engrafted in a death like his?”

II

It is true that all of us have experienced “dying moments” in our lives. This is part of what it means to be human. We are made of flesh and spirit. And both are vulnerable to suffering and death. But what exactly is a “dying moment?”

* When you suffer the death of your first four-footed friend—or your last;
* When you fall head over heels in love, only to be told, “I don’t want to see you anymore;”
* When you miss that promotion, or lose that job…when you come to realize you’ll never be chair of that Department, or the company’s next CEO;
* A dying moment comes when your body doesn’t work like it used to: when you can no longer do what you once took for granted;
* A dying moment comes when loneliness is waiting for you when you turn off the light at night;
* A dying moment is when you must somehow figure out how you’re going to keep on living with the loss of a loved one: a parent, a child, a sibling, or a friend.

Yes, we all have had—or have—our dying moments. We carry them in our hearts. But sometimes they carry us to where we do not wish to go, and like powerful water, push us down into dark and places where it’s a struggle to even breathe.

The Bible affirms that Jesus was tested in every way that we are—yet remained without sin. He was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” He wept for his friend Lazarus. And he wept over Jerusalem in the same way that some of us are weeping over the state of our nation today. He took all of these things—and more—to the cross, that through his dying moment, which was horribly real, we might be set free from our enslavement to sin and our domination by death. It was the only way...because this is something we can never achieve by ourselves.

III

It is Christ’s hand really, you know, that reaches down into our dying moments to pull us free from the waters, to bring us back to the land of the living. I have seen it happen many times:

* When a Vietnam veteran finds hope and healing after his struggle with addiction and the dissolution of everything he had—who goes on to become a veterinarian;
* In a former heroin addict who Christ calls to become a pastor;
* In people who have suffered through a failed marriage or other relationship only to be surprised by joy in finding the right person to spend their life with at last;
* And with those who have lost loved ones, yet in time have found within themselves a deeper capacity to love others than they ever thought possible—and all through the grip of that Hand that will never let us go!

Maybe that’s what it means to *“walk in newness of life,”* as Paul says in our text. Through our baptism, we may not be fully free from sinning, but we are freed from the guilt that paralyzes us. We are free to say, “yes,” and say, “no” --as David Gambrell says in his essay on Baptism.

*“We let go of old burdens and destructive habits in order to embrace Christ’s new way of truth and life…we turn away from violence and hatred…we confess our personal sin that afflicts us in order to receive the promise of God’s healing grace.”*

St. Origin, one of the Early Church Fathers, said this about “newness of life:”

*“As long as we are making progress, we may be said to be walking…and those who are making progress will eventually come to the place where they ought to be.”*

They call this “sanctification:” the long walk home that is done when our baptism is complete—when we “die and rise” in Christ.

*-Epilogue-*

So what happened below that check-dam, when that hand reached down to hold me with a grip like steel? It was the hand of the third man who was there that day: my friend Harris. He managed to position that canoe in a way that enabled him to venture out upon its upturned keel to reach and hold me. When I was finally able to take more than two or three breaths, he said, “Go get Armen!” And I did. We used the picnic cooler to float him free—and administered CPR on the riverbank to bring him back. A tragedy was averted on that summer afternoon. The waters did not overwhelm us. Two of us went on to became professional musicians and the third became a pastor. Now we’re all walking each other home…

I pray that each of you also, through all your dying moments, will feel the grip of that Hand, and the power of that Love that will never, ever let you go. And if you’re not yet fully sure of that, then may you, like Jonah, call out to God when the waters cover your head; and may Christ pull you up into sunlight—to a place where you can breathe easy, at last.

*“For just as Christ was raised from the dead…we too will walk in newness of life.”*

Amen.