

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

“In the very midst of life, Snares of death surround us,” wrote Martin Luther (LSB755:1). It may seem an odd way to begin a sermon in Christmastide, just two days after the Feast of our Lord Jesus’ birth, just two days after we heard how the Word became flesh and sacrificed Himself and calls us to believe in Him that we might have life.

And yet, thoughts of death do surround us at Christmas. Perhaps it’s because death visited a loved one at Christmas time. Perhaps it’s because persons cause destruction and death at Christmas time, like in Nashville on Christmas morning, for whatever purpose that was; or like in years past it’s churches being attacked and bombed at Christmas time. Perhaps, it’s the liturgical days that follow the birth of our Savior that give us pause to think on death — St. Stephen, Christian martyr, on December 26<sup>th</sup>; St. John, the apostle about whom the rumor spread that he would not die (John 21:23) today, December 27<sup>th</sup>; or the commemoration of the Holy Innocents tomorrow December 28<sup>th</sup>, which remembers the slaughter of the Bethlehem babes (Matt. 2:16). In the midst of life, death surrounds us.

I’m thinking on death a bit today also as we take up the text of our Gospel. Simeon’s song, you know, is part of our funeral liturgy. “Lord, now You let Your servant go in peace; Your word has been fulfilled. ....” I’m thinking on death today as we heard that Simeon was promised “*by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.*”

We don’t have such promises made to us, however. We never know when death will visit us. We never know if “*This night [our] soul is required*” of us (Luke 12:20). The Christian life has been characterized as one big preparation for death. Are you ready for death?

We know what death is, and it’s more than just the loss of the breath of life. Death is a consequence of sin; it’s an enemy of life; it stings; it can be frightening. We may not like to talk about it, but are you ready for it?

Certainly part of being ready can mean having your personal affairs in order: having your will, your trusts, your beneficiaries, etc., all up-to-date. I admit I need to review these things. It could mean having a burial plot for you, your wife, your family. Anyone who has been through a funeral knows that it’s a lot of work to get things together. Wouldn’t it be nice if most of it were already done in advance? Gathering the information needed at your death—funeral preferences, burial information, personal information, financial information—is a way of being prepared, getting ready for death. It’s been a while since I’ve mentioned this, but we do have some forms at Zion that you can use for all this. Get this information to your loved ones, to your pastor.

But more important than this kind of preparation is your spiritual preparation. Are you ready to say with faithful Simeon, “*Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace*”? Using Simeon as an example, you can be.

Simeon, we’re told, “*was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.*” So what about you? Well, that’s who you are in many ways, for the Holy Spirit came upon you in your baptism. In this sacrament, you were washed, “*your heart sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and your body washed with pure water*” (Heb. 10:22). In your baptism, your sins were washed away (Acts 22:16). United with Christ by holy baptism, not only in a death like His but also a resurrection like His, and “*your eyes*” get to see “*your salvation*” for you recognize that it’s by your own “*works done by you in righteousness*” that saves you, but Christ saved you, “*according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit*” (Titus 3:5-6).

And in this washing, you were given a righteousness, not according to the law, but through faith in Christ, a righteousness that comes from God, from Him who came to fulfill the law on our behalf — as He did here at forty days at His presentation according to the law of Moses: “*you shall set apart to the LORD all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the LORD’s. ... Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem*” (Ex. 13:12-13). Our righteousness comes from Him who came to be our righteousness.

You are ready for death, when like Simeon you are waiting for the consolation of Israel, that is, for Jesus. And Jesus does console us for He shared in our flesh and blood. He partook in fallen creation, even to the point of death. He consoles us for by His death, He destroyed the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and delivers us from sin and from fear of the chains of death. Jesus is our Comforter — He sends another Paraclete in the Holy Spirit (John 14:16), but He is our Comforter in the first place, for He became like us in every way — tempted like us, suffered like us, and all this so that He could sacrifice Himself for us and make “*propitiation for the sins of the people*” (Heb. 2:17). Jesus consoles us because darkness and death could not hold Him; He rose triumphant over death and the grave and has opened the way of life for us who must also pass through death.

You are ready for death, when you, like Simeon, are devout: that is, when you devote yourselves “*to the apostles’ teaching, to the breaking of bread and the prayers*” (Acts. 2:42); that is, when you come to meet Jesus “*according to His word*” in the place He has promised to be for you, when you hear His word given to the apostles’ to proclaim — His death and resurrection for you, a light for you in the darkness of your sin. You are ready when you are baptized and believe and remember your baptism daily. You are ready when you partake every Lord’s Day in the sacrament of Christ’s body and blood.

Yes, it's especially here that you are like faithful Simeon — indeed, more privileged than he. Whereas Simeon took up the Lord's Christ in his arms, you take Him up in your mouths. And just as Simeon knew this child in his arms was the Lord's salvation for Jew and Gentile, we too "see" in this sacrament that He is our salvation and believe that His body and blood are "given and shed for [us] for the forgiveness of [our] sins."

How appropriate, then, that the church, ever ready for death, uses faithful Simeon's song after this sacrament.

Of course, our sins still oppress us in this life. So "where shall we for refuge go, where for grace to bless us?" Luther asks and then answers confidently: "To Thee, Lord Jesus, only! Thy precious blood was shed to win Full atonement for our sin. Holy and righteous God! Holy and mighty God! Holy and all merciful Savior! Eternal Lord God! Lord, preserve and keep us in the peace that faith can give. Have mercy, O Lord!" (LSB755:3).

Yes, we are ready for death when we come to meet the Lord in His temple, when we come to hear His word, when we come to receive His sacrament. And having received, we respond with Simeon: "*Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.*"

Come, then, you righteous and devout, you who have received the Holy Spirit, you who have been waiting for your lips to taste your consolation, the goodness of the Lord. Come, eat and drink, be forgiven, and be ready always for your death. Be ready with Simeon to depart in peace and enter through this gate to life immortal.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.