

Sermon 1-13-19
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W. Hempstead, NY

Based on the Second Lesson for The Baptism of our Lord, Romans 6:1-11

A Beautiful Finish

This congregation was founded by people of Norwegian background. Therefore, it's appropriate to tell Norwegian jokes here. On a drinking binge Lars accidentally drank a quart of varnish. Of course, he died. But he had a beautiful finish.

Pagan teaching says that death is natural. The uncreated, self-existing, eternal universe that paganism believes in has death built into it. Indeed, without death there would be no natural selection – the survival of the fittest. And according to Darwinian theory, unless there is natural selection there can be no macroevolution – one species evolving into another. So, if we really stop to think about it, according to Darwinism, death is our creator. How absurd is that?

Stay with me a minute concerning Natural Selection. It is scientifically provable. Microevolution – minute changes in the same species – is also provable. Indeed, we can breed plants and animals because of microevolution and natural selection.

But Charles Darwin made a daring logical jump between the minute changes we see in nature and the major differences we see when comparing different species. This jump is called macroevolution. Over eons of time by small minute changes fish grew lungs, legs, feet and crawled out on dry land. Then cattle hanging out by the sea gradually had their noses move to the top of their heads, grew flippers instead of legs and became whales. This is actual macro-evolutionary theory.

However, it's all unprovable. We've never seen such things happen. The fossil record doesn't give the theory the kind of unequivocal support it needs. Most importantly, as we saw several weeks ago, the scientific discovery of Irreducible Complexity in living things presents a huge and probably fatal problem for macroevolution. All living things down to the smallest single cell creature are biological machines made up of myriad smaller machines. Machines can only function when all necessary parts are present and properly assembled. For instance, there can be no such thing as half an eye. It would be a non-functional appendage and natural selection would weed it out rather than make it a fully functional eye. This is Irreducible Complexity.

In reality, then, macroevolution is a mythological tale based purely on faith that it can be so. Why such ardent religious faith in macroevolution? People want it to be so because they don't want there to be a Creator God. Why do we want to deny a Creator God? So that we can make our own determinations of good and evil – especially in the sexual realm – and live accordingly. Thus, ardent faith in macroevolution, despite its considerable and even fatal problems, is just another example of our rebellion against Yahweh.

Natural selection is cruel but very efficient. It makes sure that only those with the fittest genetic code are able to reproduce. Its great arbitrator is death. And this brings us back to the question: is death really natural?

There's nothing "natural" about death in actual human experience. Death rips shocking giant holes in the fabric of life and community. If death were so natural, we wouldn't be terrified of it. We wouldn't grieve it. No government would be able to hold its people in line using the powerful threat of death.

Some declare themselves unafraid to die. I think what they mean is that they're not afraid to put themselves in dangerous situations where death is a real possibility. There are others that want to die. But, the vast majority of us live in terror of death. And this tells us that death is not natural at all. It's a curse, a disaster upon the human race and upon this universe.

Now, unlike paganism, Christianity does not teach an uncreated, self-existing, eternal universe. Rather it teaches an uncreated, self-existing, eternal Creator God – the Triune Being, Yahweh, who has revealed Himself through Moses, the prophets, our Lord, Jesus Christ, and the Apostles. And there is no death in our Creator. He is eternal – deathless. Therefore, why are we subject to death? Why is death in this universe? Why does it exist?

Through Moses and the prophets, Yahweh has revealed that death is His judgment against the human race for the initial rebellion of our first parents against Him – and our continued rebellion. We were not meant to die. This universe was not meant to be subject to death and decay. But death is the price we pay for desiring to be our own gods, the masters of our own personal universe, the arbiters of our own personal systems of right and wrong, the ones rebelling against our Creator's good purposes for us.

Therefore, when God sent His Son, Jesus, into this world for our sake, He sent Jesus to take on the fundamental problems of this created universe – human rebellion and death. We read in John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John 1:3, "Through him all things were made..." John 1:14, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." One of the three persons of the Triune Creator God, Yahweh, I AM WHO I AM, became flesh. This is the miracle of Christmas. It's the mystery of the two natures of the Messiah. Jesus is true God, yet true man.

But there is another mystery hidden in the two natures of Messiah. You would think that if the Son of God came to earth as a human, He would be born in an immortal body, a body that could never die. But Jesus came in a mortal body subject to all the vicissitudes of this life – a body that could die. Jesus, who had no sin, nevertheless took on the body of a sinner, a body doomed to die because of sin. He was born in Bethlehem as a mortal human being.

In this mortal life, Jesus' task was to be obedient to His Father unto death – even the lynching He received on the most humiliating of all execution devices, a cross. The death of the Son of God in mortal flesh with all the sins of humanity imputed to Him was sufficient to make atonement before God for every human being that will ever live – even you and I. This is the great Good News.

And once this great work was accomplished, Jesus obtained three great rewards. First, He was reborn from the tomb as the first immortal human being ever to exist.

Second, He was given authority to grant the immortality He had won to the entire human race. No more physical death. Third, He was given authority to rescue humanity from the great consequence of rebellion – the Second Death.

What is the Second Death? As far as Lutherans are concerned, the Bible teaches two resurrections and two deaths. The First Resurrection occurs here in this life. It's also known as being born again, conversion, being baptized into Christ or living and reigning with Christ. The Second Resurrection is a bodily resurrection into an immortal body like Jesus' and continuing to live and reign with Jesus in His Kingdom. This second resurrection will occur on the Day of Christ's return and the beginning of eternity.

The First Death is the physical death of these mortal bodies. Upon physical death, those who are living and reigning with Christ in this life continue to live and reign with Him in the heavenly realms until the Second Resurrection. For unbelievers, however, physical death ends life until the Second Resurrection.

At the Second Resurrection the judgment of all the living and the dead will occur. The dead who have been living and reigning with Christ in the heavenlies will be given immortal bodies to continue doing so on the new earth. Believers in Christ still alive on this earth will be transformed into immortal righteous human beings and enjoy the new earth as well.

On the other hand, at the time of Christ's return, all who have rejected God's enormous grace in Jesus Christ, both the living and the dead, will be banished to the Second Death. The book of Revelation tells us that this is the Lake of Fire prepared for all rebels, both angel and human. The humans who enter the Second Death will completely die to righteousness and be eternally separated from God. In their new immortal bodies, they will become totally evil like the Devil and his angels. Together both species will be permitted to continuously bring their rebellion to all its horrible consequences forever. There will be no beautiful finish.

Therefore, in this great matter of death and eternal condemnation, Jesus is the real thing. We read in John 1:4, "In him [Jesus] was life, and that life was the light of men." This means that Jesus is the only cure for the monstrous things set against us – our own rebellion, sin, death, the power of the devil and eternal condemnation.

Now, our gospel lesson this morning proclaims the beginning of Jesus' work to save us. We simply read in Luke 3:21, "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too."

The baptism that John the Baptist proclaimed was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. However, since Jesus was born sinless and lived sinless, He is the only human being who has ever lived that didn't need to repent. He is the only human being who never needed forgiveness of sins. Yet, Jesus was baptized by John into the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. What does this mean?

One thing is for sure. The Father was pleased with Jesus for doing so. The Holy Spirit coming in bodily form like a dove and the voice from heaven confirmed this.

Therefore, we can conclude that by being baptized, Jesus was taking the initial step of becoming God's sacrifice for our sin. Through baptism Jesus was allowing the Father to impute to Him the sins of all humanity as if He were in need of repentance and forgiveness of sins, although He was personally sinless. From this we can also conclude that Jesus was unreservedly identifying Himself with sinners – with each

of us personally. Finally, by submitting to the Holy Spirit descending upon Him – even though He Himself was holy – Jesus began the process by which Lord Holy Spirit would be poured out on all flesh. It's for these reasons that we celebrate Jesus' baptism today.

Now, when we compare the baptism that John the Baptist preached with Christian baptism two important things emerge. We read in Mark 1:4, "... John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Notice what kind of baptism John preached – a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Let's compare this to what Peter proclaimed on the Day of Pentecost 33A.D. in Acts 2:38, "... Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." We see that repentance and forgiveness of sins are also contained in Christian baptism. However, forgiveness of sins is given in the Name of Jesus Christ. This is the first difference. The justification of our lives before God can only be found in the atoning work of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

The second difference is that those baptized into Jesus Christ will receive God's gift of the Holy Spirit. That's something that John could not give in the baptism he preached. Rather, John spoke this way of Jesus in Luke 3:16, "... 'one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.'" Therefore, in Jesus the prophetic word was fulfilled – both the prophecy of John as well as the Old Testament prophets who lived long before him. Only Jesus can baptize in the Holy Spirit.

The Christian baptism we have received, therefore, is most powerful. This morning's second lesson says in Romans 6:3-4, "... all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death[.] 4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."

On the cross Jesus died both the first and second death for our sake. From the tomb He was raised from the dead in the second resurrection for our sake. Therefore, we are being told here in Romans that Christian baptism absolutely connects us with these powerful, universe-changing experiences that Jesus went through for our sake. In spiritual union with Jesus, we die the dreadful Second Death in Christian baptism, but without having to die it. Jesus has died it in our place.

In Christian baptism we are also raised into the first resurrection of the new birth. Lord Holy Spirit gives us faith to receive Jesus' work upon the cross so that our sins may be forgiven and our lives justified before Almighty God. But we are also raised by faith with Christ into grateful expectation of the second birth into righteous immortality with Almighty God. This is the wondrous blessed reality God has placed into the midst of this cruel universe through the historical coming and work of Messiah Jesus. And it's all graciously contained in baptism into Christ Jesus.

To be baptized into Jesus Christ is to die with Him and to be raised with Him. In the present age these are spiritual experiences received by faith in the Word. But for those given faith and new birth in Jesus in this world, these experiences will become a reality in the coming age much more certain and solid than the reality we see around us now. Indeed, it will not only be a truly beautiful finish, it will be a wonderful beginning.

Dying with Christ in baptism gives Christians a fearlessness in death. Certainly, whatever discomfort there will be in the process of physical death is something to be feared. But beyond the final hurt of this life, nothing can harm those whom Jesus has graciously declared His own.

By the way, this fearlessness is the thing pagan dictators of all kinds have hated the most about Christianity. That's why they attempt to stamp out the Church of Jesus Christ. For, it's difficult to intimidate true Christians who have seen God's truth in Jesus Christ. His Kingdom is not of this rebellious world.

Come, then, if we have been baptized in Christ, let us celebrate our own baptism this day. The Word of God declares that in baptism we have died with Christ to sin and rebellion. It declares that in baptism we have been raised with Him to righteous eternal life. Come Holy Spirit and make us sure of this amazing, wonderful Word by your gracious gift of faith. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.