

Sermon for Proper 22, Year B
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Holy Nativity, Plano
4 October, 2009

“Since ... the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage.”

There is quite a bit packed in to that last phrase. The fear of death subjects us to lifelong bondage. But I think this means several different but connected things all at once. The most obvious meaning is that, before Jesus came, all people died, and therefore they were under the power of death, slaves to death. In answer to that, Jesus died on the cross so that we no longer die. Instead, we know that, in Christ, we live eternally. We are no longer under the power of death, even though we still suffer the death of our earthly bodies.

But what about the fear? Before Christ’s atonement, people were always expecting to die *and* were afraid to die. Death was an enemy and an oppressor that was inevitable and also terrifying. It still is for some. Even some of the greatest secular philosophers have been afraid of death. It is said that Voltaire, the great French despiser of Christianity, died screaming in terror. It only makes sense when we think of what he was facing that day.

The fear of death keeps us from taking any real pleasure in this brief, earthly life. Whether we try to cheat death and prolong our lives by good behavior, or whether we try to ignore death and live life like a big hedonistic party, the fear of death overshadows our lives. It sucks all the joy out every moment. We live in bondage to our fear. In response to that, Jesus has defeated death. St. James tells us that “Perfect love casts out fear.” And when we live in the love of Christ, we no longer need to fear anything. Every moment is a gift from God, and we can live our lives joyfully, knowing that even our suffering has a purpose and will be replaced with sheer bliss in the end. We are delivered from the bondage of fear.

There is yet another way in which we can be in bondage to the fear of death. Notice that the writer of Hebrews mentions the devil. He says that the devil is “the one who has the power of death”. Have you noticed that people don’t like to talk about the devil anymore? Somehow it’s easier to ignore him. But the Bible is very clear that there is a personal proponent of evil, the adversary and enemy of God, who has power in and over the world. And he is also the tempter and accuser of God’s people. He is the master of entrapment, because he will tempt you to do evil and then use your guilt to move you further and further from God. His ultimate desire is to dominate and devour you, robbing God of his victory in you.

The devil uses the power of death and the fear of death to tempt us. Remember that St. Paul tells us in I Corinthians that the “sting [or spur] of death is sin”. But he also tells us in Romans that the “wages of sin is death.” The devil uses this vicious cycle to

snare us. We respond to the fear of death with sin, and that just makes us more deserving of death. The *conquistadores* search for the Fountain of Youth and slaughter native Americans along the way. People in macabre Asian restaurants consume the flesh of unborn babies in pursuit of longer life and health. Fleeing from death, we sin and cling to a more profound death.

Those are particularly stark examples. But death stands here for a whole continuum of loss. We're not just talking about the flight from our own physical death. We experience a kind of death in every loss. The loss of a loved one to death. The loss of our money. The loss of a relationship. The loss of control over our own lives. The loss of control over anything we have come to consider our own. It might even be that you feel you have lost control of your church. Even the anticipation of these things is a turning point where the devil can insert himself. He can twist your choke-collar of fear and whisper in your ear, "Aren't you afraid? Don't you need to get control? No one should keep you from being secure and happy! You need to make sure no one can take that away from you!"

And when your fear issues in anger and hatred and jealousy and dissention, the devil is pleased. He has you on his diabolical carousel of death. He has goaded you into making yourself more fit for hell than you were before, and he licks his chops in anticipation. Because he has the power of death and destruction over all who walk away from God and righteousness. By pursuing your own power to fight against death, you have given him the power of death over you.

But the writer of Hebrews is not worried about the devil, because Jesus has "taste[d] death for every one." He took upon himself the nature of flesh and blood, our nature, so that he could turn the devil's own weapons against him. Because of the fear of death, the devil was able to goad the Jewish authorities, and they conspired to have Jesus put to death. And that very death was the devil's undoing. By the sacrificial death of the spotless Lamb of God, all of us had our debt of sin paid in full. We no longer have anything to fear from death. The devil overplayed his hand, and he has no power over us anymore. Jesus has conquered death and drawn its sting. He has destroyed the devil and sprung open our cage of fear.

"For because [Jesus] himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted." Now we have an answer to the devil when he tries to goad us into fear and anger and hatred and jealousy and dissention. And the answer is this: Go away! Death and loss have no power over us anymore. Jesus has given us life, and we *will* honor him. We will give him glory in our choices. We will not fall back into fear and death. We will strive for love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and self-control. This is the way of life that our new Lord and Master has given us. Any suffering in this life is far surpassed by the bliss of everlasting life with him.