

God will swallow up death forever!

A sermon on Isa 25:1-9 preached by Ralph W. Klein in the Augustana Chapel of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

The Monday after the Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost, October 10, 2005

So what text are you preaching on next Monday, Marilyn asked? Oh, Isaiah 25, the passage about the great banquet at which God will swallow up death forever, I replied. But that text is about Easter, she said.

Yes, every worship service is about Easter, including this one. We have surrounded this text this morning with four hymn verses that express quite clearly my own attitude toward death and dying.

The first hymn is a marvelous, triumphant one: "When we on that final journey go that Christ is for us preparing, we'll gather in song our hearts aglow...."¹ But of course that is not how it will be for me at all. I will go kicking and screaming to the other side, not wanting to leave here. Yet, perhaps, that verse is appropriate after all, it is all a matter of timing. Because that glorious final journey may begin the second after we die, when we will join the chorus of all who have gone before us.

The second hymn, from For all the Saints, indicates that our subject today is not so much about dying as about living in the face of death. "And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long, steals on the earth the distant triumph song, and hearts are brave again and arms our strong."² What constitutes the "strife" we are in. For many of us it is vocational uncertainty, or overwhelming work load, or a broken relationship, or a dozen

¹ *Lutheran Book of Worship*, 161, stanza 5.

² *Lutheran Book of Worship*, 174, stanza 5.

other challenges. You all know the strife you face. And always then, at our lowest moments, we hear at a great distance news the dim strains of the final victory chorus, when Christ will be all in all, and then we are reenergized to face anew the challenge of the day because, just because we know the end of the story.

Old Johann Crueger wrote the third hymn verse three and a half centuries ago. "Then these my eyes my Lord will know, my Redeemer and my Sister; in God's love my soul will glow, I myself, and not another! Then the weakness I feel here will forever disappear."³ You all know my weaknesses all too well, in the classroom, as a colleague. But I have many weaknesses beyond those, more than you could ever imagine. These weaknesses, these sins, are not the real me, and in God's presence they will all fall away, forever disappear, as I stand there in the righteousness of Christ.

St. Francis penned the final hymn verse. Last week we observed "care for creation in this space," and St. Francis rings the changes on that theme. His hymn invites all creatures of our God and King, the wind and breezes soft, flowing waters, pure and clear, and even mother earth to lift their praises, and then finally he urges that old enemy, death, to join in praises to God. He tricks this old enemy into becoming our friend.

"And you most kind and gentle death, waiting to hush our final breath, you praise God! Alleluia! You lead to heaven the child of God, where Christ our Lord the way has trod. Alleluia! Alleluia!"⁴

Death, which intends to do us in, inadvertently leads us to where we want to go in the first place. That's the kind of defiance of death that I covet.

³ *Lutheran Book of Worship*, 340, stanza 5.

⁴ *Lutheran Book of Worship*, 527, stanza 6.

Last Friday we entertained Bruce in our home. Bruce and I went to high school together, more than fifty years ago. Now after fifty years of silence we picked up the conversation where it had left off. I don't remember what we talked about fifty years ago—impending tests, sports, women?—but in the course of Friday evening Bruce got around to questions that bother him, such as what do we mean by everlasting life? We batted that question around for a while, and then I told him the anecdote that I think I first read in a book by Willi Marxsen. There was this old German professor who had written a four-volume work on resurrection. On his deathbed, while his family and his doctoral students were gathered around him, someone asked, "Professor Schmidt, do you have one last thought about resurrection?" "Yes," he said, "I know I will be safe." After four volumes of research, after sorting through streets of gold and gates of pearl and trying to decipher whether and how we will live there, with or without our present families, he knew only this, I will be safe. And that was more than enough.

And so we come to the text for the day from Isaiah 25. It describes God's future as a lavish banquet, a wonderful thought for us, but probably even more exciting for its ancient audience who rarely ate meat at all. My favorite banquet menu would include thick steaks and lobster with drawn butter, though some of you would no doubt drool for bowl after bowl of tofu. At this great Isaianic victory banquet, it is said, God will swallow up the veil that is spread over all peoples—the veil of mortality which threatens us all. Yes, God will swallow up death forever. Death in the biblical world was a mythological figure with a voracious appetite. Canaanite texts describe death as having one lip that drags on the ground, one that touches the sky, and death stretches its tongue

to the stars. But this great, grim swallower will become the swallowee—truly punishment to fit the crime.



And then the picture that has been projected before you all morning—the gravestone of my parents. My father, a Lutheran pastor of the old school, had a tough last fifteen years of his life, constantly battling clinical depression, leading to an attempted suicide when I was a senior seminarian. But then after that traumatic event things righted themselves just a bit and he lived out his ministry until retirement. One time he called me up and said he was working on a sermon on the word Hallelujah. "How come," he asked, "that word sometimes is spelled with an H, as in Hallelujah, and sometimes with an A, as in Alleluia?" He could be obsessive compulsive as well. I gave him some kind of answer that satisfied him and he went on with the sermon writing. That

sermon eventually became one of his favorites, and it made the rounds as he pinch hit in the pulpit during his retirement, until one Sunday late in April, 1969, over here on 61st street, when he never came out of the sacristy for the 8 a.m. service. After an embarrassing wait, an usher went back to see what was the delay, and there he lay, fully vested, lying dead in the sacristy...with the sermon on the word Hallelujah stuck in his pocket.

As I looked down at the gravestone of my parents yesterday, I wanted to know who was the greater hero to me—my father who preached the praises of God literally until his death, or my mother who had the sheer genius to pick this simple stone with its one-word message.

Good news! There's a banquet coming, with steaks and chops, all washed down with vintage wines. At this banquet, as God promised and as Jesus seconded the motion, God will swallow up death forever.

And let the people say: Hallelujah.