

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Ash Wednesday • February 26, 2020

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 • Psalm 51:1-17 • 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 • Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

In the sixth century, St. Benedict wrote his famous *Rule*, a guide to ordering life in monastic community. The *Rule* outlined the norms, customs, and expectations that would define life for those living in community together. As you can probably guess, it is long document. It runs for seventy-seven chapters of various length. Many of the chapters are about spiritual virtues and liturgical customs. “Chapter 7: On Humility.” “Chapter 20: On Reverence in Prayer.” Many of the chapters deal with the practical matters of living in community together. “Chapter 32: On the Tools and Property of the Monastery.” “Chapter 41: At What Hours the Meals Should Be Taken.” And some of the chapters sound like they were directed at a particular person. “Chapter 42: That No One Speak After Compline.” “Chapter 68: If a Sister is Commanded to Do Impossible Things.”

When we read old documents like this, our tendency is to just think of them as interesting artifacts. They give us an idea what it was like to be an Italian monk in the sixth century, but you shouldn’t actually try to heed any of its advice. But occasionally the veil of history parts and a ray of illumination shines through. In chapter four Benedict offers one such piece of advice, one that also feels fitting to reflect on this Ash Wednesday. Benedict writes, “Keep death daily before one’s eyes.” If this sounds like a rather odd piece of advice, it’s because there doesn’t seem to be any alternative.

We often feel as if we are surrounded by death. It is often hard to keep it away from our eyes. Just out of curiosity, I opened up the homepage of a national newspaper as I was writing this on Tuesday morning, and these were the main headlines. “South Korea nears 1,000 virus cases and Iran reports at least 15 deaths.” “Violence in Delhi and praise for Modi’s efforts on religious freedom.” “Egyptian ruler whose reign reached a bloody climax with Arab Spring dies at 91.” “Prison guards brutally beat an inmate, his family says. Hours later, he killed himself.” I could go on, but you get the point.

So why is Benedict saying that we should keep death daily before our eyes? You could be justified in thinking that Benedict’s advice is just out of date. Maybe a group of monks living in the beautiful Italian countryside need to be reminded of death every now and again. But for those of us who experience life as an endless barrage of breaking news and push notifications, none of which ever seem to be breaking or pushing anything good, we don’t need to be reminded of death all that much.

Except we do. Because at some point, we stop being scandalized by death. It just becomes a kind of white noise in the background of our lives. Something that gets accepted, taken for granted, and written off as normal. We write off death in any of its forms as just the way things are. We rationalize it away. We rationalize poverty. We tell ourselves that we would help people in need, but there are some people you just can’t help because they’ll spend it on booze. We rationalize sexism. If you followed Harvey Weinstein’s trial you saw a textbook example of how misogyny gets dismissed as an eccentricity if you have enough money. We rationalize racism. Consider how often we use the names of cities as a coded way to talk about race while still giving ourselves a sheen of plausible deniability.

And we rationalize death itself. One of our neighboring funeral homes has a slideshow that they play during wakes sometimes that shows a computer animation of a tree with leaves falling down. And as the leaves fall down the screen reads something to the effect of, “Death is just the giving of memories in the river of time that brings new seeds to life.” Benedict had it right. We look at death without really seeing it. We glance at death all day, but we rarely keep it before our eyes.

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So why does Benedict not want us to ignore death? Well, there's a hint in today's reading from 2 Corinthians where St. Paul encourages his listeners "not to accept the grace of God in vain." When we think about accepting the grace of God in vain, we probably think about works. It means having faith and then going off and doing works somewhere else. Maybe something like the Lenten disciplines. Fasting. Prayer. Almsgiving. Faith without works is dead. So maybe faith without works is kind of vain, too. But Benedict would tell us something else. Something much more provocative. That we accept the grace of God in vain when we don't keep death daily before our eyes. In other words, we cheapen resurrection when we rationalize death. In the light of the resurrection, we can see things how they actually are.

Let me give you one way to think this in terms of how we observe Lent. We are used to thinking about Lent as a process. As Ash Wednesday, Passion Sunday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter. We think chronologically. We try to reenact it. We go from death to life, crucifixion to resurrection. And when you get to Easter, that's it. You start over the next year. But the season of Lent is a season of repentance, meaning to turn around. *Metanoia* in Greek. So what if we turned this around? Not just a journey from death to life, but from death to life and back to death. To experience the grace of God in vain is to fail to return to the places that are still full of death, where the light of the resurrection hasn't yet dawned. In some ways, we can only truly see death in the light of the resurrection.

St. Paul even alludes to this when he describes his work as a missionary. How's it going? Not great. It's "afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, [and] hunger." He calls it what it is. He says it's hard. He doesn't try to rationalize it away as, "Well, I'm a light sleeper anyway. And I'm not really hungry to begin with. And riots introduce you to some interesting people." No. He says it's bad. But what else does he say? He says that now is the day of salvation. Meaning Christ is present with him even in his suffering.

It's only when you understand that that the power of the reading comes through. We are "dying, and see--we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything." That's the difference between rationalizing death and redeeming it. We rationalize death when we say that it isn't so bad or that maybe there's some logical explanation for it. We redeem death when we trust that God is capable of being present there, too.

Lent should not be a season of self-flagellation or pious fasting, but an invitation to pay attention to sit still, even if just metaphorically. To turn around and look at death, to look at sin, to look at evil, and speak openly about what it is. To keep it before our eyes. To look at death not to make ourselves sad or morose because it's Lent, and we have an inkling sense that we're supposed to be dour. But because we believe that Christ is present there, too.

So as you come forward to receive ashes tonight, that's what I want you to remember. Not that you're going to theoretically die someday. Not that you should feel a false sense of guilt. But that our struggles, our doubts, our anxieties, and, yes, our deaths are kept daily before the eyes of God. And that even when we return to dust, Christ is there to meet us.

Keep death daily in front of your eyes, Benedict tells us. For we are "dying, and see--we are alive."

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