

Always of Good Courage!

Psalm 19:1-14; 2 Corinthians 5:1-10

November 1, 1998

“For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” Here is the good news: when we die, God has already made provision for us to live again and to live forever. How this is done, we cannot know; we scarcely know how this life works. However, this we do know from Paul: when this earthly body is destroyed, we will receive a spiritual one. This is why Jesus Christ lived and died and lives again, so that we might also. And God gives us the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of this good news.

Paul gives us hints about the reality of the new life beyond this life. The transition will not be unlike moving from a tent to a house. Or again, it will not be unlike changing clothes: taking off some old clothes, and putting on some new ones. The main thing is that we shall not simply be swallowed up by death in such a way that death is the final end of all things. Yes, we shall all die, but that is not the end. As Paul says, we shall be “swallowed up by life.” Here is a radical, startling, new idea, countering the common suppositions of his own day and even of ours. There are many who suppose that death is the end of all, and they live their lives accordingly. But Paul counters this with the good news of a great reversal: instead of death swallowing up life, it is a new and greater life which swallows up both life and death.

“For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” Paul continues: “Here indeed we groan. . . . For while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety; . . . that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.” Here we find an acknowledgment of the continuing difficulties of this life. The promise of the resurrection does not remove us from all difficulties or anxieties now. It does not make life easy or worry free. The greater reality of the life yet to come does not undo or take away from the reality of the life we live here and now.

Why is this acknowledgment important to us? For several reasons. Some would accuse Christianity of denying the reality and importance of this life by focusing all our attention on the life yet to come. Not so. We not only acknowledge the reality and importance of this life, we also understand it as a wonderful gift and as a part of God’s good creation. At the same time, we know that life is hard. Life is a struggle, and this world is perhaps best understood as a school in which we either

grow and develop character or we head the opposite direction. We believe that the Christian faith makes the best sense of the blessedness and the difficulties of life simultaneously.

On the other hand, there are those who want to reduce our understanding of the resurrection to a quality of life, such that it can be begun and experienced even now. And surely Paul himself talks in the previous verses about the daily renewal of our inner nature, even while our out nature wastes away. This is happening, but this is not all there is to it. In addition to this inner preparation being worked upon us, there is also a new life being prepared for us. So, even given that this life is God's good gift to us also, the contrast between the struggles we face now and the blessedness we are yet to inherit does help us to appreciate and to anticipate with some eagerness the life to come.

“For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” As a consequence of this good news, Paul writes: “So we are always of good courage. . . . We make it our aim to please him.” Despite the reality of the anxieties and difficulties of this life, the promise of the resurrection does give us good hope for the future, and therefore it gives us good courage for the living of our lives here and now. This is the effect of the future victory on our current lives: “we are always of good courage.” This is the impact that Jesus Christ has on our lives now: “we are always of good courage.” This is the reason that God has given us the Holy Spirit: “we are always of good courage.”

Think what a difference this makes in our lives. There is much of which to be afraid: the uncertainties and vicissitudes of life, the harsh realities of sin and evil, the potential for crime, the possibility of persecution for the faith, the certainties of decay, loss, and death. It would be understandable if these fears were to overwhelm us and to paralyze us. And yet, it is in the face of just such as these that “we are always of good courage.” Part of the purpose of the gospel of Jesus Christ is to help us with the living of our lives, here and now, day by day.

Moreover, given good courage in the midst of fears, we are not simply to exist, not simply to endure, not simply to cope, not simply to manage to slip by. More than all this, we actually live in such a way as to aim to please God. We are lifted beyond the struggle for survival to the joy of living for a purpose, living for a reason, and working for a goal. And this is our goal, the highest of all: that we please God. This is not to earn God's pleasure or our salvation; that has already been granted. It is because of God's always prior good gift to us, because of God's always prior gracious mercy, because of God's courage-inspiring promise of the resurrection, that we respond with the grateful desire and effort to do what we can to please God.

How can we do this? How can we actually please God? By loving and worshipping God, and by loving and serving neighbor. We cannot have one without the other. To love and worship God without loving and serving neighbor is not to love and worship God at all. But to try to love and serve neighbor without loving and serving God is to fail even to know who our neighbor is, let alone to love or to serve neighbor.

So it is that we gather here to worship God each week, and then we go forth to continue to serve in the world, at home, at school, at work, at play, in our neighborhoods and communities, cities and counties, states, nations, and all the world. We gather here to worship, then we go out to work. We gather here to praise God, then we go forth to serve God in and through and by serving neighbor. We gather here to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, to receive the gospel, to learn the word of God, to believe the gospel, and to be built up in the faith, then we go forth in the faith as messengers of the gospel and as agents of the love and mercy of God.

Today we are grateful to receive and to share again the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Here we are reminded of the reality both of the earthly life and sacrifice of Jesus Christ and also of the heavenly life to come. On the one hand his body was given for us and his blood was shed for us, that our sin might be forgiven. On the other hand, God has raised him to a new and different life, the same person and yet forever beyond the powers of death, so that Jesus Christ is now our living Lord and Savior. We would not be here remembering him if his death 2,000 years ago were the end of it all. But we are here communing with him and with God his father because he is alive again and because we anticipate his triumphant return. We are here communing with each other and with Christians around the world and even in outer space because he has made it possible for us to face life with good courage. And we are here communing with the saints who have gone before us because we are confident of their resurrection to new life, also.

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To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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