

Where, O Death, is Your Victory?¹ • Psalm 24; Revelation 21:1-6; 1 Corinthians 15:50-57
Sheth LaRue • October 31, 2021
Aurora First Presbyterian Church

This morning we're taking some time to acknowledge that death - especially over the last two years - has been pervasive and persistent in all of creation. Death has covered this world, casting its long shadow into the deepest of valleys and stretched to the highest of peaks. Death has strolled down the affluent streets of Beverly Hills, blown across the deserts of Afghanistan, roamed through the alleyways of Mumbai, rambled through the backwoods of the Ozarks. Here in this congregation we've lost many loved ones and those who we've sat with for so long are no longer with us, either because they have moved on to other churches or moved on to the next life. Death has been at the forefront of life for so long, but this morning I want to declare this good word to all who has an ear to listen: death is no longer an option. Death is no longer an option.

The Greek word for revelation found in the Bible is ἀποκάλυψις (apokalypsis), an uncovering or unveiling... literally laying bare or making naked... these words found in this final book of the Bible are laid bare for all of us to see. These words I just read are the uncovering, the unveiling, the foretaste of the Second Coming of Christ, when all of creation will witness the completion of all old things ever-known and the start of all new things never-known. The words found in the book of Revelation are often read in a context of doom-and-gloom but in all truth and honesty, these unveiling words should be read as “a word of hope and the promise of new beginnings.”²

These words from the twenty-first chapter, heard booming down from the throne of God, are words that have been spoken before³ and “echo the hopes of the Old Testament prophets and other early Jewish apocalypses.”⁴ Since the earliest days it has been sin, evil, and death that has ravaged the earth. Since the earliest days all of creation has groaned for salvation, moaned for justice, cried for mercy. Since the earliest days, God's people have longed for when God would

¹ The basis for this sermon comes from: Reverend Dr. William Barber, “June 14, 2020: Sunday Sermon” Washington National Cathedral, June 14, 2020. Accessed October 20, 2021. <https://cathedral.org/sermons/sermon-the-rev-dr-william-j-barber-ii-2/>

² David Cortés-Fuentes, “Exegetical Perspective of Revelation 21:1-6a” from *Feasting on the Word Year B*, Vol 4, Barbara Brown Taylor, et al., eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 231.

³ Leviticus 26:11-12; Ezekiel 37:27; Zechariah 13:9; Jeremiah 32:38

⁴ David Cortés-Fuentes, “Exegetical Perspective of Revelation 21:1-6a” from *Feasting on the Word Year B*, Vol 4, Barbara Brown Taylor, et al., eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 231.

“destroy...the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; [and that God would] swallow up death forever”⁵ as Isaiah had prophesied. These words found here in Revelation reveal to us the final culmination of God’s completed work in Heaven and on Earth; they affirm God’s final triumph and the outcome of the struggle of the faithful: death is no longer an option.

“The home of God is among mortals...”⁶ writes John; “the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”⁷ John’s revelatory words declare that God will move in with us; we’re going to live together and God is going to wipe every tear from our eyes, and God is going to take away any semblance of death, and God is going to take away all mourning and crying and pain. These are dangerous words! God – the author and sustainer of all life, in all creation – *that* God is going to make all things new with us at God’s side.⁸

These words have been held close and hoped upon by the church’s earliest saints who faced death and destruction at the hands of state powers who ordered “churches to be razed to the ground and the Scriptures destroyed by fire...giving notice that those in places of honor would lose their places...if they continued to profess Christianity.”⁹ These revelatory words sparked the imaginations of those faithful followers of Christ about what their freedom would look like, should it ever come.¹⁰ They had no guarantee that Christ would come in their lifetime, but they hoped. They had no date on their calendars when Christ would come, but they hoped. They had no idea how that day would come about but standing firm in the face of their very own deaths, the saints who came before us defiantly declared those dangerous words: death is no longer an option.

These words are the foundation of our faith, aren’t they? They’re the final chapter in the book of life. We were created to glorify and enjoy God forever¹¹ but humanity sinned, turning

⁵ Isaiah 25:7-8a

⁶ Revelation 21:3

⁷ Revelation 21:3-4

⁸ Revelation 21:5

⁹ Eusebius, *History of the Church* VIII.2 translated by G.A. Williamson (London: Penguin Classics, 1989)

¹⁰ Roger A. Ferlo, “Pastoral Perspective of Revelation 21:1-6a” from *Feasting on the Word* Year B, Vol 4, Barbara Brown Taylor, et al., eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 234.

¹¹ “The Shorter Westminster Catechism, Q. 1” from *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part I: Book of Confessions* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2016), 205.

their backs on God and God's covenant. Sin penetrated humanity's being and, despite our very best efforts to do good and be good we still fall incredibly short.¹² Humanity lost their communion with God and became bound to death; in that sinful state of guilt, death became the only option.

While humanity did all it could to restore that relationship, sacrificing and following strict laws, there was no way to mend and redeem the relationship. But God wasn't done with God's creation and so sent the Sinless One to restore the relationship with humanity. Jesus, "the eternal Son of God, became man"¹³ and exemplified how to be human. He cared for the broken, fed the hungry, healed the sick, prayed for creation, worshiped God, stood up for the weak, and spoke against injustice and cruelty. He challenged powerful and oppressive institutions, governments, and systems, and called them to return to their upright ways, words that subjected him to death. And it was through this crucified death that all of humanity – all of creation – experienced God's plan for redemption and restoration. God wasn't done with God's work! God wasn't done with God's beloved world! Listen to these words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

The cross was the end, the death of the Son of God, curse and judgement on all flesh. If the cross had been the last word about Jesus, then the world would be lost in death and damnation without hope; then the world would have triumphed over God. But God...raised Christ from the dead...the resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's Yes to us. Christ died for our sins; he was raised for our righteousness...if Christ had remained dead, this death sentence would still stand...[but] because Christ is risen from the dead our sentence has been lifted and we are risen with Christ...what happens to him happens also to us...In the resurrection we acknowledge that God has not given up on the earth but has personally won it back. God has given it a new future, a new promise.¹⁴

When Christ died he took all our deathly sins with him to the grave; and when he was resurrected, he brought with him that good news that death is no longer an option. When we say yes to God's yes we become disciples, not only believing that good news but living lives in full realization that death is no longer an option.

As difficult as it may be in the moment, when one of our fellow disciples leaves this mortal coil and is ushered into the presence of Christ – when one of our siblings dies – we mourn

¹² Romans 3:23

¹³ "The Shorter Westminster Catechism, Q. 21" from *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part I: Book of Confessions* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2016), 206.

¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer from "*Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works: Conspiracy and Imprisonment 1940-1945*" Mark Brocker, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 472.

their absence and weep in our loneliness. But confident that death is no longer an option, we somehow also rejoice...we rejoice knowing that when they took their last breath here, they were moved to the presence of Christ and drew in that clean, crisp heavenly air – the beginning of their life eternal, and the beginning of our source of comfort in their absence.

When death is no longer an option we don't worry about what our employers will say, or what our customers will say, or what our co-workers will say because "the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it."¹⁵ We don't worry what our family members will say because "The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle"¹⁶ will defend us in ways we don't even understand. When death is no longer an option we don't care what our neighbor thinks or what our neighbor next door believes because "God has moved into the neighborhood"¹⁷ and is living with us. When we have no fears...when we have the Author, Creator, and Sustainer of Life living among us we boldly and confidently declare that death is no longer an option for all the world! And when death is no longer an option, and fear is no longer a stumbling block, and persecutions turn puny we start to make some demands of the world around us, not just for ourselves but for all of God's people.

When death is no longer an option we not only stand against racism in all its forms but we use our voices, our power, our privilege to call out racist beliefs, racist language, racist structures and systems. We demand that the real, uncomfortable history of the United States be taught in our classrooms, not the whitewashed lessons that leave bureaucrats sleeping well at night. We demand justice and reparations for our siblings of color who are targeted, arrested, and lynched on our streets; we demand mercy for our First Nations siblings on reservations being raped and murdered; we demand equality for our Latinx siblings stuck and stranded in concrete jungles. We stand this day and demand that their deaths are no longer an option.

When death is no longer an option we don't cry 'build the wall' but instead seek ways that we can build longer tables in this country. We don't seek to isolate ourselves while simultaneously punishing refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants fleeing rape, exploitation, slavery – even their very own deaths. We demand our legislators rework and rewrite the unjust and out-of-date immigration laws and policies that punish good, decent, fellow human beings

¹⁵ Psalm 24:1

¹⁶ Psalm 24:8

¹⁷ Revelation 21:3, *The Message*

seeking to live just one more day, seeking to live with us here in the land of the free...are we brave enough to say that death is no longer an option?

With suicide rates among our active and retired military continuing to climb and an ever-increasing number of veterans moving to the streets because our government has turned its back on them we confidently declare that their death is no longer an option. We demand that our siblings who serve or have served should receive fair pay; we demand that our soldiers receive respectable, useable, and accessible health care, and have free access to mental health care; we demand that those non-citizens who have worn our country's uniforms and translated for our soldiers be given the swift path to citizenship. We honor those who have selflessly served this nation and demand that their death no longer be an option.

We look into our neighborhoods, into our towns, into our woods and see the 140 million poor and low-income people in our nation from every race, creed, color, sexuality, and we demand that their voices be heard, that their stomachs be filled, that they have equal access to the lunch box, to the ballot box, and to the jury box. We demand that they can earn livable wages, that they can receive health care, dental care, and vision care. We push back against the shadows that have fallen in the valleys and demand that the death of our poor neighbors who live among us can no longer be an option.

We seek ways to educate ourselves about the ever-growing and blossoming understandings and language of gender and sexuality and we find ways to listen to and hear the voices of our LGBTQIA+ siblings whose day-to-day lives are surrounded by discrimination, harassment, prejudice and death. We find ways to ensure our neighbors, our neighborhoods, our businesses treat all as equals, no matter who they love. We demand that the violent and fatal deaths of these – these who are created in the very same image and likeness of God as we are – we demand that their deaths no longer be an option.

When death is no longer an option we demand more from our city councils, more from our state assemblies, more from our nation's capital. When death is no longer an option we say no to excessive military spending and the creation of death machines and instead say yes to life-giving programs. We say yes to welfare, yes to free education, yes to healthcare for all. When death is no longer an option we work to ensure that our neighbors have healthy food and clean water. When death is no longer an option we work to ensure that the strangers are welcomed, the

naked are clothed, the sick are cared for. When death is no longer an option we work to ensure that the prisoners are visited, restored, and reconciled.

When death is no longer an option we claim this word for the greatest of these and for the very least of these among us. When death is no longer an option we do everything in our God-given power to make sure that death is no longer an option for *all* of creation. We don't hoard this good news, we don't hide this truth, we don't deny others access to God's grace, goodness, and mercy but we instead work with all of our being to invite everyone into this God-given neighborhood of abundant, unending life.

When we come into this place proclaiming that Jesus has been raised from the dead, is it possible for us to utter in the same breath that any death in this world is an option?¹⁸ If Christ has not been raised, then everything we've ever uttered about him is foolishness and everything you've believed has been foolishness...we're liars if death is the only option! Listen to these trustworthy and true words from the apostle Paul written to the church in every place¹⁹ – to all the saints who face death and destruction at the hands of their oppressors:

“What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”²⁰

We care for the widows and orphans, for the oppressed and marginalized...

We share peace and compassion, mercy and justice for all of creation...

We dare believe the unbelievable and speak those dangerous words...we dare rise from our mortality and come dancing out of that tomb with Jesus because we have no doubt – no doubt! – that death is no longer an option! Death is no longer an option! Death is no longer an option! Thanks be to God.

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:12

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 1:2

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:50-55