

5TH SUNDAY IN LENT

MARCH 17, 2013

WHEN DEATH BECOMES LIFE

Pastor Jim Dunn

1 Samuel 26:7-9

7 So David and Abishai went to the army by night. And there lay Saul sleeping within the encampment, with his spear stuck in the ground at his head, and Abner and the army lay around him. **8** Then Abishai said to David, "God has given your enemy into your hand this day. Now please let me pin him to the earth with one stroke of the spear, and I will not strike him twice." **9** But David said to Abishai, "Do not destroy him, for who can put out his hand against the Lord's anointed and be guiltless?"

1 Samuel 28:7-11

7 Then Saul said to his servants, "Seek out for me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and inquire of her." And his servants said to him, "Behold, there is a medium at En-dor." **8** So Saul disguised himself and put on other garments and went, he and two men with him. And they came to the woman by night. And he said, "Divine for me by a spirit and bring up for me whomever I shall name to you." **9** The woman said to him, "Surely you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the necromancers from the land. Why then are you laying a trap for my life to bring about my death?" **10** But Saul swore to her by the Lord, "As the Lord lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing." **11** Then the woman said, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" He said, "Bring up Samuel for me."

2 Kings 13:20-21

20 So Elisha died, and they buried him. Now bands of Moabites used to invade the land in the spring of the year. **21** And as a man was being buried, behold, a marauding band was seen and the man was thrown into the grave of Elisha, and as soon as the man touched the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood on his feet.

Romans 6:8-11

8 Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. **9** We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. **10** For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. **11** So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

One movie I haven't seen yet that I would like to see is *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. It's supposed to be about a couple that meets on a train. The man's name is Joel, and he is somewhat shy. The woman's name is Clementine, and she is a crazy woman. They fall in love and have a stormy relationship that does not last. Both are heartbroken. Then, Joel finds out that Clementine has had the painful memories of their relationship erased. Out of desperation, he contacts the inventor of this procedure, Dr. Howard Mierzwiak. Joel wants to have Clementine erased from his own memory. But as Joel goes through the memory removing procedure, it becomes clear to him that he can't get Clementine out of his head.

In real life, researchers have been developing a medication that can dampen painful memories. It's called metyrapone. And doctors think that someday it will be used to treat patients who suffer from severe posttraumatic stress disorder. In tests, it has proven to remove only painful memories, not the good ones. Now, why would people want to get rid of any of their memories? Well, for PTSD sufferers, old, painful memories trigger negative emotions that can be crippling for them. The dampening of their painful memories decreases the negative emotions connected with them and gives these sufferers the chance to live a relatively normal life.

But why stop there? Why remove only the painful memories? How about a medication that removes the memories of past sins and failures, old resentments, rotten desires, and past moments of self-loathing? Let's erase all of these. Because even though we thought they were dead and buried. Desires, resentments, and self-loathing that we once put to death. Something in us has a way of bringing them back. Something about us summons from the dead these ghosts from our past. We are enticed all over again.

It's like that creepy account of King Saul when he summoned Samuel from the dead. While he was yet alive, Samuel told King Saul that he no longer had God's favor. God would no longer be with Saul in the war against the Philistines. Due to Saul's repeated disobedience, the kingship was going to be taken from him. Then, Samuel died and was buried. But King Saul was desperate for Samuel's guidance. He hired a medium to bring Samuel back from the dead so Saul could seek his counsel. When she did, the spirit of Samuel told King Saul the same thing he'd told him while alive. And when we bring back from the dead old resentments, rotting desires, past feelings of self-loathing, we might at first greet them and embrace them like old friends. But when the pleasure of the reunion wears off, we're soon left with the same horrified, hollow feelings those desires, resentments, and self-loathing used to leave us with.

Yet, are we powerless against them? Are we simply at the mercy of our bad memories, rotten desires, and old guilt feelings?

Another creepy account in the Bible holds the answer. This one is about the prophet Elisha after he died and was buried (2Kings 13:20-21). "Now Moabite raiders used to enter the country every spring. Once while some Israelites were burying a man they suddenly saw a band of these Moabite raiders. So, they quickly threw the man's corpse into Elisha's tomb. When the corpse touched Elisha's bones, it suddenly came to life, and the man stood up on his feet." Buried with Elisha, that man rose to new life.

Buried with Christ in Baptism, you and I rise with Christ to new life. But past sins, rotting desires, old resentments, old guilt feelings, old self-loathing, and old bad habits remain in the grave. These ghosts from your past speak a dead language that means nothing to you. Your Father in heaven speaks your mother tongue and you live by every word that proceeds from His mouth. You are dead to sin, and it is dead to you. But you are alive to God.

That is a promise from your Father that He cannot forget. A promise etched in the blood of a cross. A promise etched in the charred marks of a stone blown off of its hinges.

For the Father sent His Son, totally exposed, totally vulnerable, and undefended as in the parable in today's Gospel reading (Luke 20:9-20). Placing His Son at the mercy of our past sins, rotting desires, old resentments, old guilt feelings, old self-loathing, and old habits. It's like David standing over the sleeping body of King Saul. Saul was seeking to kill David. Now, David and one of his soldiers had successfully snuck past all of Saul's sentries, tiptoed past all of Saul's sleeping soldiers, and stood over the sleeping King Saul. David could end this threat to his life. David's companion urges him to do it. But David spares Saul and remains vulnerable to this king who wants him dead. So also Jesus, the Son of God stood over death and sin and all of the ghosts from our past. But He made Himself vulnerable and exposed to them. He placed Himself at their mercy. He let them put Him in the grave. He let them stand over Him victorious.

Then He turned the tables on them. They couldn't keep Him down in the grave. Death couldn't keep Him down. None of the ghosts from our past could keep Him down. He turned the tables. He locked them in the grave. Jesus stood over them as Champion. We stand with Him through Baptism, through faith in Him.

True, we can let the ghosts from our past get out. We can summon them from the dead. We can bring them back in a creepy kind of resurrection. But they do not stand over us. They cannot stand over us. They are the defeated. Buried with Christ and raised with Him to new life, we are champions with Christ. We stand over the ghosts from our past.

Therefore, send the ghosts of your past packing. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your sinful nature. Don't give those old ghosts even one vote in how you conduct yourself or in how you feel about yourself. Those old ghosts can't tell you how to live. They can't tell you how to feel. They're not the boss of you. They're dead, but you are alive in Christ the Resurrected One, and you're living in the freedom of your Father in heaven.

AMEN