

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Lent 4

March 11, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Justin Gran

It has to happen

—John 3:14-21

Have you ever heard of the term “mortality rate” or “death rate”? It’s the rate of death in a particular population over a certain period of time. In some countries that are less developed and have less medical resources, it is said that the death rate is higher than it is in more developed countries. What that means is a certain percentage of the population dies per year. Some organizations may talk about lowering the death rate in certain populations through humanitarian aid or medical advances. But in reality, the mortality rate of the entire human race past and present is one to one -- one death for every person born. It has to happen. It can be prevented in some cases. Certain life choices may delay it for a time. But finally, in the end, death is unavoidable. It is inescapable. It has to happen.

We know that death is a reality we must all face. But a more important question to consider is “why?” Why does death have to happen? As the world copes with death it tries to come up with different answers. “Death is just a natural part of life,” or “death is just part of the circle of life.” Death is not a natural part of life; God didn’t create death as a natural process. Death is not part of the circle of life. Death and life have nothing in common—they are opposites. So why does death have to happen? Because of sin. Because the first man and woman sinned, death has come to all people young and old alike.

As Jesus talks about life and death in John 3, he points back to an interesting story in the Old Testament and it’s not the Garden of Eden. It’s an account of the Israelites in the desert. Long story short: they spoke against God. God sent venomous snakes. The snakes bit the people. Many people died. It’s easy to look at that story from a human perspective and think, “Wow, that’s awful that all those people died.” But what was truly awful wasn’t God’s judgment. It was the people’s sins. Their sin and rebellion against God was a terrible stench in God’s nostrils.

Because sin happened and happens in our lives, death has to happen. Earlier in John 3, Jesus told Nicodemus the cold hard truth—flesh gives birth to flesh. Sinful flesh gives birth to sinful flesh. Mortal flesh gives birth to mortal flesh. Probably the best way to put it is the way we put it on Ash Wednesday—“From dust we are and to dust we shall return.” But not only is death looming at the end of life, it was a reality before life even began. We had yet another lesson this morning that dealt with life and death—Ephesians 2, which begins with, ***“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.”*** Spiritual corpses. That’s what we were. And the spiritual mortality rate is also 1:1. No one, except for Jesus, was ever born without sin, and therefore without spiritual death stamped across his birth certificate. And no one has ever been born with the ability to not sin, except for Jesus. Therefore no one has ever been able wiggle their way out of the death sentence that sin deserves.

Because of sin, it has to happen. “It has to happen.” That’s the theme of Jesus’ ministry. Death was a must for Jesus. As Jesus came down from heaven, and as he stepped into our world of sin and death, he said with great resolve, “It has to happen.” Not the death and destruction doled out by his almighty hand. But his own death had to happen. ***“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”***

Many Israelites died, driving those who hadn’t back to the Lord. They had no other option but to confess, “We sinned. Pray to the Lord and take away this death sentence.” The Lord told Moses, ***“Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.”*** Whoever looked, lived. God offered an antivenom to the Israelites that day in the desert to spare them from physical death. 1500 years later in that same corner of the world, God offered himself into death to spare the world from eternal death, ***that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.*** It had to happen.

Human beings are quick to blame God for death. That’s what the Israelites did in the desert; ***“You brought us out here to die.”*** And then you consider all those deaths by snakebite, “why would God do that?” the human heart asks. Why would God sentence the world to death? Why would God let death take a small child, or a father of three? But unless we accept the blame for death caused by our own sin, we will not see God’s solution and live. Instead of baulking at God’s justice, let’s marvel at God’s grace. When we look at what God has done in Jesus Christ, that should bewilder us all the more. Look at the Son of Man lifted up on the cross, bloody, beaten and dying. It moves us to ask, “Why would God do that, for sinners, for me?” See the Son of man suffering and handed over to death even after the crown of his creation rebelled

against him, even though I would one day grumble against God more than a then thousand hungry Israelites. Why did God do that for me?

Because God so loved the world. ***“God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*** Paul echoes Jesus’ words in Ephesians 2; ***“Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.”***

We know it’s by grace (God’s undeserved love) we are saved, not by anything we’ve done, because. ***“God so loved the world.”*** Did you notice that’s in the past tense? It doesn’t mean God *used* to love the world but now he doesn’t. But it means that God loved the world in a specific, complete action, it’s a done deal. He gave his Son. His Son gave his life, no. He was lifted up on the cross and he died. That’s how God loved the world. That’s how God loved you, before you were ever born.

Look at the cross. Look at the love of Christ that moved him to say, “It has to happen. There’s no other way. I must die so that you may live.” Look and live. Believe in him so that you will not perish, but have eternal life. That is the amazing transformation that God has worked through Christ in all believers. He has brought you from eternal and spiritual death to spiritual and eternal life. When we hear John 3:16, it sets our eyes on heaven, doesn’t it? Because of God’s love in Jesus and through faith, I get to go to heaven. And that’s true. But this death to life transformation is a reality right now. You have spiritual life right now. If you keep reading past the familiar John 3:16, Jesus talks about the spiritual life you now live as a believer. In order to live this life, another death has to happen—every day.

Sinful flesh gave birth to sinful flesh, but you were born again through water and the Spirit, through baptism. That sinful flesh and all its desires and all its evil deeds were buried with Christ, and through baptism you were raised to life with Christ. Therefore, sin must be put to death. It has to happen. Death and life have nothing in common—I can’t go on embracing sin, which made me dead, and at the same time embrace the life I have in Christ. Death and life are polar opposites, like darkness and light. Jesus said, ***“This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.”*** I cannot love the darkness and love light at the same time. If I love sin I hate Jesus. If I love Jesus, I hate sin. In the life we now live in Jesus Christ, sin cannot be kept alive like a little pet. It can’t be taken out for a harmless walk now and then. It has to die. Jesus makes that point pretty clearly here in John 3—light or darkness; life or death; you can’t have both. That point comes out even more clearly as the gospel of John progresses.

Here are just two examples. In John 5, Jesus healed a man who hadn’t been able to walk for thirty-eight years. Later, Jesus saw this man at the temple and said to him, ***“See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.”*** You cannot straddle darkness and light. Sin in our life must be put to death or something worse may happen. Second example: In John 8, a woman caught in adultery is brought to Jesus. Pharisees want to stone her. After Jesus said, “let he who is without sin cast the first stone,” they walked away one by one. Once they were gone, Jesus said, “I do not condemn you.” He forgave her. Then he said, ***“Go, and from now on, don’t sin.”***

Jesus said of his own death, “It has to happen.” With great resolve he said, “it must happen” to do away with your sin and eternal death, and to bring you from death to life. With that same attitude, the believer says, “It has to happen.” Every day sinful attitudes and sinful deeds must die. They must be drowned in the waters of my baptism, and I must arise no longer as spiritual corpse, but a living sacrifice to God. And like Christ’s “has to happen” attitude is motivated by his love, our “has to happen” attitude is motivated and empowered by Christ’s love. ***God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.***

Look and live. Look to Christ and live eternally because of what he has done for you. But each time you wake up to live another day, look and live. Look to Christ for salvation from yesterday’s sins, and live in today’s forgiveness and grace. Look to Christ and his cross and live for him who lived, died, and rose for you. Amen.