

Good Friday (b)
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
April 2, 2021

In early 1976, when I was ten, my mom died. That summer, my dad took the five of us kids on a big trip out west. We visited all my mom's siblings and our cousins in Utah and California. We stayed with my grandma for several days in Rockville, Utah, a tiny town near the entrance to Zion National Park. That's where my mom grew up. It's the most beautiful place on the planet Mars. Desert country, deep canyons and mesas. Cactus everywhere. Rockville sits in a canyon cut by the Virgin River. All around you, you've got these sheer cliffs, in some places thousands of feet high, and everything is this unworldly red color.

I was wearing a cast on my arm during that whole trip (motorcycle accident). But nevertheless, I decided one day I was going to climb up the canyon wall directly opposite my grandma's house. Not a good idea to do that alone, but I was eleven. Didn't tell anyone where I was going. It took me a long time with my cast, but I picked my way up, zig-zagging around the steep places, to a shady perch a couple hundred feet below the top of the canyon, where I ran into a vertical wall...couldn't go up anymore. So I sat down.

Below me I had a beautiful view of the town where my mom had spent her childhood, where my dad and she had met and gone on their first dates. I was melancholy, thinking about her. After grieving for my mom for half a year, I was coming to terms with her death to some extent. I was starting to see it from the long view—as if it was a natural part of life. We say our goodbyes, we cherish our memories, we miss each other terribly. But all in all, it's a natural process. I was beginning to see that big picture. And I felt this kind of comfort flood through me as I was sitting there in that high, beautiful place. Death wasn't so bad after all.

And that's when it happened. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a movement. I looked over and there, not two feet from my hand, was a little scorpion. Stinger and all. I started to stand up to move away from him, and suddenly I was sliding down the slope. I had been sitting on top of a field of scree rock. And now the entire slope was moving, a mini-avalanche. I back-pedaled like crazy, trying to dig in—of

course my cast was not helping. And I realized quickly that nothing was going to stop me. I looked down the slope where I was heading, and saw the drop-off. I was sliding towards a ledge. Suddenly, I realize, this was death. I was sliding towards my death, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

By pure luck there was some exposed bedrock at the ledge, and I got some traction on it. I skidded to a halt, right on the ledge. There was loose rock all around me. The ledge was slippery. The drop below me was sheer, at least 50 feet down onto big boulders below. I sat there frozen with fear. The slightest movement of my body could start me sliding again, right over that ledge.

So every dreamy abstract thought I'd had about death a few minutes before—that it was a natural thing, that I could be OK with it—that was all a puff of smoke. Now I was staring straight into the void myself, and it was pure injustice, pure senselessness, pure terror and isolation. I could almost hear my mother screaming in heaven, "hold on...don't you go over that ledge!" She wasn't yelling "it's OK." I could see the grief and desolation in my dad's and brothers' and sisters' faces when they found my broken body. I despaired at what my recklessness was going to cost my dad. The utter senselessness of what was suddenly staring me in the face was beyond description. It was all separation, shock, and meaninglessness. And there was laughter, too. Mean laughter. The idea that I could be friends with death....baloney!

The next half-hour was rather stressful. With one hand, I carefully shoveled and wiped all the loose rock off the ledge next to me, and then eased myself sideways onto the exposed spot. Little by little I made my way along the ledge, doing this, until gradually the ground below came up to my level. When I got back to grandma's, my dad asked me how I got so dusty. I told him the real reason when I was twenty-six years old.

One thing we always affirm about death as Christians is that it's personal. You can put up all kinds of language like wallpaper over it. You can examine it from a distance through all kinds of philosophical lenses. But each of us will have an intimate, very personal encounter with this overwhelming power. We get foretastes of it during our lives. Foretastes: like when we lose people we love, when we're sick, when we fail, when we don't get the job, when things feel chaotic. We get those foretastes of what is

coming. We might look left and right while it's still in the distance, but at some point we will be on the ledge where there's nothing more to grab hold of.

For Christians who believe in a God who knows us and loves us personally and intimately—there's something basically not right about death. It's not natural for us. It isn't meant to be. We can't take refuge in abstractions very easily as Christians. Some would say our view is ridiculous. What's wrong with death? It is a natural part of existence. There's nothing personal about it. Death is morally neutral. The individual passes away. Life in general moves on. After a while, the pain is forgotten and the names on the gravestones lose their meaning to anybody (unless the person was famous). Why not just go quietly into the night?

It disturbs me more and more as I get older, when I hear people talk that way about death. Why? Because it's a denial of who God is. Each of us is God's masterpiece. God pours his life and all his love into each individual that has ever walked this planet, and in the fullness of time he poured out his life on a cross for each of us. We don't have some pathetic puny God who can only deal with us in groups of a thousand. Who sets things in motion and then watches them play out without interest. On the contrary, he pours his whole life—God does—100% into everything he makes, and then he lives our life with us. It's love. Every prostitute's life is 100% important to God. The names wear off the gravestones, but God never forgets a single name.

And that is why it's disturbing to hear people talk about death in a dispassionate, neutral, cold way, like it's a natural process. It's a symptom of death itself. The corollary is that people start talking about life like it's cheap. God does not desire the death of any of his creatures. God means us to have life with him forever. That's what we're built for. So let's not get too comfortable with death.

For believers, it's very personal. Death is where we meet God's judgment personally. It is where we face the reality of our sin. Our life of being separated from God, our rebellion against God. Death is where all of that stuff about sin, which we've learned about in Sunday School and which we've experienced here and there throughout our lives, finally hits home completely. There's nothing morally neutral about it: God loves us, and yet we must die. That can only mean something is wrong, unjust,

broken, potentially meaningless in this world...the way I felt sliding down that cliff. We're right to take it completely personally, because we know God loves us in a completely personal way.

So if I can't be friends with death, if I can't step back and become too philosophical about it, where do I get my comfort? Well, my Lord—the master of my life—the Word through whom the universe came to be—was nailed to a cross, and there he yelled, "my God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" He experienced with his own body and soul—the injustice, the sense of betrayal, the unnaturalness, the wrongness of it all. The complete broken-ness that was not meant to be, and should not be. Jesus yelled those words on our behalf, because he knows that brokenness, that wrongness, within his own divine being.

I will never understand it: An all-powerful God, who's willing to give it all up for tax collectors and prostitutes, and me. But that is where I will put all my hope. Nice ideas can soothe our minds for the time being and cover over the reality we're talking about here tonight. But in the end, I'll need to live by a promise. I won't need someone giving me new ideas about the great scheme of things. I'll need to know that my final judge in that moment is also the one right there who's saving me. I'll need to know that he is there yelling my last words with me. I'll need to know that he is sliding off that ledge with me. And most of all, I'll need to know that there's something more than rocks waiting for me at the bottom.

Tonight, as we contemplate Jesus breathing his last on the cross, and being put in that cold grave, I think we're getting a clear message about where he is going to be when you and I fall onto those cold rocks below. A new life will come, even out of those rocks.