October 2, 2011
Sermon on the First Lesson: 2 Kings 13:20-21
Theme: Lessons from the Life of Elisha:
The Lord defeats death!
First Lesson: 2 Kings 13:20-21
Psalm 73
Second Lesson: Romans 6:1-14
Gospel: Luke 7:11-17
Hymns: CW 426, 607, 283, 167

Sermon on the First Lesson: 2 Kings 13:20-21: 20 Elisha died and was buried. Now Moabite raiders used to enter the country every spring. 21 Once while some Israelites were burying a man, suddenly they saw a band of raiders; so they threw the man’s body into Elisha’s tomb. When the body touched Elisha’s bones, the man came to life and stood up on his feet.

As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people both now and forevermore. Amen.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Over the past month we’ve read and learned from the life of Elisha. We’ve heard some of the amazing things God did through this prophet who lived 2800 years ago. The Lord made a tiny flask of olive oil keep pouring till it filled a house-full of empty jars to rescue a widow’s sons and remind us of God’s power to generously answer our prayers. We heard how God used a promise spoken by Elisha along with the water of the Jordan River to heal leprosy. And the Lord opened our eyes of faith to see along with Elisha’s servant how God’s angel armies protect his people. And yet there are still more marvelous things that God did through Elisha that we you can read for yourself in 2 Kings: like when an iron ax head floated in the river, when poisoned stew was made safe, or a hundred men were fed with just a little bread.

But after all these extraordinary events, our reading holds one that sadly is known all too well to us: Elisha died and was buried. For fifty years Elisha had served the Lord bringing God’s Word to Israel. But finally his life came to an end in one of the most repeated phrases in the Bible: blank—fill in a name—died. Abel, Adam, Abraham, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, David, Stephen, James—and we could make the list way longer—they all died.

People die. This is one Bible truth we don’t need to take on faith. We’ve seen it in the obituary column, or more personal—Great grandma, grandpa, a parent, friend, relative, child, someone we knew from work or church, the accident heard on the news, the fallen soldier, a celebrity, young, old. The longer we live, the more we see and hear it: “they died.” And the harder it becomes to avoid that truth, that one day each of us will die too.

It’s all so common, so frequent, so all around us that people use phrases like “the cycle of life” or “just a natural part of life” or to quote the Lion King: “the circle of life.” But anyone who has been close to the horror of death firsthand can start to see how every human attempt to make death not so serious is truly a lie.
But only God’s Word can confirm the guesses about how bad death and tell us why people die. And I bet most of you can probably guess what verse I’ll quote to make those points. It’s one you’ve heard many times before in Sunday School, Catechism and Bible Class and in sermons: Romans 6:23: **For the wages of sin is death.** Death was not natural, but entered God’s perfect world through sin. But don’t let your familiarity with these words let you miss how striking and personal they are. **The wages of sin is death.** Wages is a payment earned, what someone has coming to them. It turns out we can’t claim we’re just innocent victims hunted by death. Death is the payment each and every one of us has earned for our crimes.

The fact we’ll die proves we are sinners. **The wages of sin is death.** Those words shatter every attempt to say I’ve lived a basically good life, done more good than bad, come to church most of the time so I’ll be ok with God. Instead those words prove the reality that we have so horribly sinned, disappointed and angered the holy God in heaven with the sin we were born with, the sins we commit every day, failing to love God above all, failing to truly put others first, the sin to think we’re not really so bad! But worse yet is that the true wages of sin don’t end when the heart stops beating, but stretch on for eternity—time without end in hell—separated from anything good, suffering punishment for a debt of sin we could never pay. And the fact we can’t stop death proves we have no power in ourselves to get rid of sin either.

Death isn’t a fun subject. But God doesn’t want us to just bury our heads in the sand like those who would rather not think about it, but put it off as gloom and doom talk, immerse ourselves in distractions and entertainment instead, or grasp at anything to avoid death. Instead, the Lord wants us know and admit both the reality and cause of death: our sin we were infected with from conception, the sin that fills our lives since we do not keep God’s commandments perfectly. But then He also wants us to turn to Him as the only One who helps! And truly the Lord can and does help!

Our lesson shows it: **Once while some Israelites were burying a man, suddenly they saw a band of raiders; so they threw the man’s body into Elisha’s tomb.** To understand what happened, we need to know the Israelites didn’t bury their dead in the ground or embalm the body like we sometimes do. Instead, they placed the body on a stone table in cave with a rock to block the entrance. When after about a year, the body had turned to only bones, they would put the bones to the side and then tomb would be ready for another body, usually from the same family. So when this funeral procession suddenly saw Moabite raiders who might attack them, they decided to put the body in the nearest tomb, which happened to be Elisha’s. What happened next is astounding!

**When the body touched Elisha’s bones, the man came to life and stood up on his feet.** Just like in our gospel lesson, death was defeated! Imagine the shock and surprise of the burial party to see the man whose cold lifeless body they had wrapped in funeral clothes standing alive and well! Could there be a greater way for our God to show us He **defeats death!**?

For that’s what happened. Elisha’s bones weren’t magical. They didn’t have any power to raise the dead. Just as Elisha never had the power to work any of the miracles he performed in life, but the Lord showed his power through him.
Just think of the messages behind this miracle God worked through Elisha’s bones. Elisha was a prophet of the Lord. The work of a prophet was to tell the people God’s Word. Elisha may be dead and gone, but Elisha’s God wasn’t! Elisha’s body may be powerless in the grave, but the Lord is Almighty! Elisha would preach no more sermons, but the Word of God he and the other prophets before and after Him was still alive and powerful. And the message of that Word was to trust in the Lord of heaven and earth as the only way, truth and life. For only the Lord can give life to the dead! Like I said before, could there be a greater way to show our God defeats death!?

And of course, you know there is. For this miracle in our reading, like all the rest of the words of the Bible point to Jesus Christ, who said these are the Scriptures that testify about me. In Catechism class this past week we learned how Old Testament prophets, priests and kings all pointed ahead to Jesus, they were all previews of the perfect work the Son of God would do to save us!

And we see it in our reading don’t we? How can we hear about death defeated in Elisha’s tomb and not think of another tomb carved out of stone some 800 years later. A grave that holds no bones. For though Jesus’ dead body was there three short days, it did not stay, He came to life and His tomb was empty on Easter morning! There in Jesus’ empty grave outside Jerusalem death was defeated again—but not just for one Israelite man, but for the world, a victory to be enjoyed by all who trust in Jesus! Since God worked a miracle through the dead bones of Elisha the prophet, how much more will He work that still greater miracle he has promised to give eternal life to all who trust in the once dead, but now living Savior. He will give life to their souls at death and then at the resurrection, to their bodies too! For the miracle at Elisha’s tomb gives us not only a preview of how Jesus’ defeated death on Easter morning, but how He will also cause us to stand up alive on our feet again when He returns in victory!

That’s your future, because God became man in Jesus Christ not to defeat death for himself, but for us all! Christ came to earth not just to raise an occasional dead person to show his power, but to defeat the true cause of death: our sin. And so He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin, to be born without the sin we were born with. And so He lived a life without sin, sinless every second, keeping every commandment, filling his life with the holiness we lack. Loving God and his neighbors perfectly, Jesus earned life and joy!

And yet He died—because of sin. Not His sin, but ours. Jesus paid the debt of sin we couldn’t. Moved by undeserved love, He paid it in full. He collected every cent of the wages of death and hell we earned, forsaken by the Father on the cross, dying beneath our curse. But by dying, Jesus defeated death—our death! Taking our sin on himself, he washed it away into oblivion! And since Jesus is no longer under the power of death, but rose and defeated death, that means the guilt of our every sin is gone. Sin could no longer hold him in the grave because He paid for it all. And since Jesus took your place and declares you forgiven, the guilt and punishment of sin can’t hold you either! For Christ the Lord has defeated death!

And in Christ’s saving work we find God’s power to push the fear of death aside. For the same Lord who once did something as unnatural as making dead bones give life has also forced death to do something that doesn’t come naturally. Jesus has robbed death of its sting and forces it to be the doorway for our souls to join him in the joys of heaven, until the last day when He pushes death’s nose in the dirt one last time and raises our bodies to life everlasting.
Therefore trust and serve that awesome Lord who defeats death! With believing and grateful hearts, remember what we heard in our second lesson: Through baptism, through living faith in Jesus we’ve been connected to his death and resurrection. That means we’ll live forever. Don’t forget that also means connected to Jesus, you have power in that same Risen Lord to fight against sin and with your whole life serve the God who had already brought you from death to life. Amen.

*The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.*

*We confess our Christian faith using the Nicene Creed on page 31.*