

Transforming Death
Hebrews 2:10-18

One of the defining features of humanity is our fear of death. It isn't that other animals aren't afraid of death – every creature runs from a predator – but our fear goes beyond an instinctual fight or flight response. We brood over the idea of death even when there is no immediate danger. Indeed, sometimes it feels as if we're not just afraid of death: we're *offended* by it, as if death were an uninvited guest, a party-crasher that ruins everything. No, we're more than just offended: we're horrified by it. No other creature is horrified by the sight of death, but we see the television images from Bucha or Mariopol, and we are aghast. We are especially horrified by unexpected and untimely death, especially the death of children or others who, we feel, *should* have had many more years of life. Untimely deaths are *not fair!* And, again, as far as I can tell, no other creature is struck by death as an injustice. Certainly other animals mourn, but we are the only ones who are angered by deaths that just don't feel *right*.

How do we humans respond to all these complicated and unique responses to the reality of death? Well, in a variety of ways. Some build pyramids – monuments to outlast death. Others go bungee jumping: basically giving death the finger. Some, who have more money than anyone ever needs – people like Elon Musk and Peter Thiel – are investing millions in technology that they hope will renew their bodies at the cellular level and make them immortal. But most of us settle simply for trying our best to put death out of our minds. We try not to think about it; refuse to talk about it; put it out of our minds. When it happens to someone we love, we try to power through it, distract ourselves from grief by staying busy, and try to get over it as quickly as possible. After a year, we should be over it, apparently. You may have read about the new mental health diagnosis, included in the latest DSM diagnostic manual, that classifies grief that lasts longer than a year as a mental illness. That should help. Nothing's more emotionally healing than having a deadline.

My own feeling is that if there's a mental illness in this whole scenario, it's our obsessive denial of the reality of death. You see, it turns out that pretending death can never happen to me or anyone I love does not stop it from happening. As a result, humanity lives in this constant downward spiral, pretending death doesn't exist because we don't want to think about it,

followed by shock and pain when it happens anyway, followed by a renewed determination not to think about again because that was painful. *That's* mental illness.

Every genuine religion deals with this human cycle of self-delusion and death. They do this in at least one of two ways: first, by trying to teach acceptance of death as normal, and second by offering the hope of a life beyond death. Our own faith, Christianity, offers both approaches, but have one feature that is unique. Our founding story tells how the Immortal God who created all the earth, at one point shrugged off immortality and became a mortal human being. Then we add that in that mortal form, immortal God actually experienced death, just as we all will.

I know that most of you hearing this have heard that part of our story your whole lives, so it really isn't a new idea to you, but try to imagine how you would respond if you were hearing that for the first time. That's guano crazy. Why would the Creator come to creation and die? Well, the New Testament and Christian teaching says that Christ – that is, God in human flesh – “died to take away our sins.” All right. I'm willing to accept on face value that Christ's death did in fact accomplish that goal, even as I don't understand how that was supposed to have worked. (Yes, I've read how most people try to explain it; I just don't think the most common explanation makes any sense.) But as I say, I can accept on faith that it happened. But I do have one question: Wasn't there some other way to take away our sins? Are you telling me that the supposedly omniscient and omnipotent God couldn't come up with a plan that didn't require Christ dying? Why not just forgive us? (And don't tell me that a price had to be paid before God could forgive us, because that's the stupidest definition of forgiveness I've ever heard. If it had to be paid for, that's not forgiveness; that's reimbursement.)

Fortunately for us, the New Testament does say more than just “Christ died for our sins.” I'm reading from the book of Hebrews, chapter 2, verses 10-18.

¹⁰ It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. ¹¹For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, ¹²saying,

*‘I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters,
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.’*

¹³And again,

'I will put my trust in him.'

And again,

'Here am I and the children whom God has given me.'

¹⁴ Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. ¹⁶For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. ¹⁷Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

Christ's death was not just to rescue us from the consequences of our sin. Christ's death was also about changing us, transforming us. Christ became one of us, with all our limitations and weaknesses, so that he could become the "pioneer of [our] salvation." And that salvation would not just save us from sin and death, it was also to save us from the fear of death: to *free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death*. And at this level, it's not just about the fact that Christ died. It's also about *how* he died, how he faced this universal human experience.

In her book *The Hiding Place*, Corrie Ten Boom tells how she and her sister Betsy were sent to the Ravensbruck concentration camp, for their crime of hiding Jews from the Nazis. They were stripped of their clothes and forced to walk in front of the guards toward the showers, and Ten Boom remembers thinking, "This is it. I can't do this." But then Betsy, who was behind her, leaned close and whispered, "Corrie, they stripped *him*, too." The sisters lifted their chins and marched their gauntlet, but not alone. This evening in our service, we have read the story of how Christ died. Did he want to do it? No more than we do. Did he rage against it? No. Did he run from it? No. Did he cry out that it wasn't fair? No. In fact, it *wasn't* fair, but maybe it never is, in which case complaining about it is pointless. Did he continue to show love to others? Yes. Yes, he did that. One day I will die. I want to die like that.

And one more thing. Hebrews adds that somehow Jesus' action in sharing our flesh and blood, then surrendering that flesh and blood to death itself, transformed death. As one of my favorite theologians, my daughter Grace, put it in a recent email: "It's not just that having the example of Christ's suffering makes ours more bearable – although that is real and definitely part

of it. It's almost as though those moments of greatest most abject suffering become transformed into divine encounter. . . I can't shake the feeling that through the Passion, Christ took what was the worst possible sorts of human experiences and made them salvific instead of just a miserable lonely end. What should be a dark pit by any logical reasoning has instead a permanent light in it." Grace adds, "The transformation goes both ways in atonement – Christ is changed by us, as we are changed by Christ. Christ was changed by suffering, but maybe also our experiences of suffering was changed too."

A wall between God and humanity was torn down. Jesus went through the gap first and partook of our mortality – partook *fully* of our mortality – with the result that now we can cross the other way and partake of his immortality. But that's another transformation, for another sermon.