

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

2 Kings 4:18-37; Romans 8:11-19; John 11:17-27, 38-45

Are you ready?

I wouldn't trade the sign of the cross for anything. There was a while, after I became a Lutheran, when I thought about it, since most of the Lutherans I knew said it was Roman Catholic, but then I got some good advice from one pretty solid Lutheran. First, he told me, "In the morning, when you rise, bless yourself with the holy cross and say, 'In the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen'" (Small Catechism). He suggested doing the same in the evening as well, before saying my evening prayers. When my conscience was burdened, he encouraged:

If the devil puts it into your head that you lack the holiness, piety, and worthiness of David and for this reason cannot be sure that God will hear you, make the sign of the cross, and say to yourself: "Let those be pious and worthy who will! I know for a certainty that I am a creature of the same God who made David. And David, regardless of his holiness, has no better or greater God than I have."¹

When tempted, he said, "make the sign of the cross...and run away as from the devil?"² He comforted me at the thought of death, urging:

Whoever believes in the Son will have eternal life. Cling to His neck or to His garment; that is, believe that He became man and suffered for you. Cross yourself and say: "I am a Christian and will conquer." And you will find that death is vanquished. In Acts 2:24 St. Peter says that death was not able to hold Christ, since deity and humanity were united in one Person. In the same way we, too, shall not remain in death; we shall destroy death, but only if we remain steadfast in faith and cling to death's Destroyer.³

Who was this supposedly solid Lutheran who spoke in such a Roman Catholic way? You might have heard of him. He's an older guy, a bit cantankerous at times, yet a loving pastor. His name is Martin Luther. Beware of reading Luther. He might just go and make Lutherans of us all.

So why am I preaching about the sign of the cross? Answer: I'm not preaching about the sign of the cross. I am preaching about death, and there is nothing else to hold to in death but the cross.

¹Luther, M. (1999, c1958). *Vol. 14: Luther's works, vol. 14 : Selected Psalms III* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

²Luther, M. (1999, c1956). *Vol. 21: Luther's works, vol. 21 : The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

³Luther, M. (1999, c1957). *Vol. 22: Luther's works, vol. 22 : Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 1-4* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

On Friday, I went down to see Judy Barckholtz in Detroit. My parents wanted the kids for the weekend—which seemed a win-win at the time—so I was going to drop them off on the way. As we drove down, I saw something I’ve never seen before and hope I never see again.

We were just north of Bristol Road. A minivan was getting onto 75. The driver must not have been paying attention, because he or she merged right into a semi, right into its trailer. I was in the lane next to the semi, a little behind it. It was surreal. At first, it seemed like it wasn’t happening. The trailer must have flown seven feet in the air. I thought for sure it was going to land on us. I swerved into the third lane and somehow, when the trailer landed, the semi driver managed to get control. He pulled off the road.

The front of the minivan, which had been flipped around, was completely crushed. I pulled over to the side, but there was a bridge and our van wouldn’t fit. I thought about running back to help anyways, but was worried that someone might clip the van with the kids in it, or that the kids might not listen and get out and get run over. I pulled off at Bristol road and called 911. I went to get back on 75 north to go help, but saw there were already a bunch of cars there, and, once again, there was nowhere safe to park the van with the kids in it.

I don’t know if the driver lived or died. But I do know one thing. The first thing I did, without even thinking, not knowing what else to do, when I saw it all happen, was make the sign of the cross. I thought of Romans 8, from which our second lessons have come the last two weeks: *“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.”*

The truth is, I didn’t know what to pray for. I didn’t know where to begin. My heart was beating too fast for me to think that deeply. I made the sign of the cross. It was my prayer as my mind raced: a prayer for whoever was in that van, that they might know the love of Jesus in this, their time of need, a prayer for the truck driver, that he might be freed from the guilt he would surely feel for an accident that was in no way his fault, a prayer for me and the kids, giving thanks that we were still alive. And what better sign was there for that moment than the cross, the cross where life was won for the dying, where sins were forgiven and guilt taken away, where the hope of everlasting

life was purchased for those who witness firsthand how frail and transitory this earthly life can be.

You can learn a lot about what a church thinks your biggest problem is by what they talk about. Is your family your biggest problem, your job, your bills, your health, your earthly wants? Some churches have even adopted the practice of asking you what you think your biggest problem is so they can help you overcome it. None of that here, because I know what your biggest problem is, because Jesus left no doubt about it, and I would be calling Him a liar on a meaningless tree if I begged to differ with Him. Your biggest problem is what put Him on the cross: sin and death. Solve sin and death and perhaps the rest will slowly, and I mean slowly, start to fall into place.

Are you ready to die? As Americans, we keep the thought of death at arm's length. This isn't the Middle Ages, after all. Death is not looming over our heads at every moment. There are no plagues. There are no wars on our soil. This is America. We don't die here until we're eighty, or ninety, or a hundred.

Tell that to the people in that minivan. Tell that to the handful of Hemlock students that have died in tragic accidents in recent years. We may be Americans, but walk through a cemetery sometime and read the dates. No one is immune to death, and death is never an arm's length away. No, death clings to us from birth. It is part of who we are. We are born spiritually dead, and we are born dying physically.

The Shunammite's son had years ahead of him. Yet he died. Lazarus had years ahead of him. Yet he died. Many of you have years ahead of you, yet, well, you get my point. Are you ready?

Death brings with it a clarity, a spirit of self-examination. I'm convinced that many of us will never be so alive as when we are about to die. But when will we die? Will you die on the day you've said horrible things to your spouse, you've taken what isn't yours, you've drunk too much at the club, you've acted up behind your parents' back, you've torn another down precisely when Christ would have had you build them up, you've set your faith aside for greed, or lust, or pride, or for a fear of being disliked? Will you die in the week, or maybe even the month, you haven't been in God's house, or heard His Word, or received His Sacrament? I don't know when you will die, and

what you will have done, but I do know this: sure as that minivan is flat, you will die, and so will I. Are you ready?

The Shunammite woman was ready. She knew and treasured the Word of God. She had given the prophet a room in her house and regularly went out to hear him preach. And so, when death struck her household, she set the boy in the prophet's bed and ran to the doctor of souls, her pastor, so to speak, and, in so doing, she was running to none other than God.

Lazarus' sisters knew where to run. They sent word to Jesus, their Prophet and Pastor, the Messiah and Savior, and, in so doing, they sent word to none other than God. And they made no bones about it: *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you."*

Elisha raised the Shunammite's son, not by his own power, and not by magic, but with prayer and an appeal to God who had miraculously given this woman this child in her old age as a reward for her love and support for the ministry of the Word.

And Jesus raised Lazarus, yes, by His own power, but not by magic. He used what He will use to raise all the dead on the Last Day: His Word. Yet both the Shunammite's son and Lazarus would die again. This was a vacation from the grave, not an escape from it. Only one has ever escaped from the grave, never to return. Death still loomed, as it still looms over you.

Are you ready? There's only one way to beat death. What is it? Die before death gets you. Die to sin. Die to death. How? Read the sign placed upon you at your new birth and in every Absolution. Take hold of the cross. Be buried with Christ in Baptism. Crucify the devil and your sinful flesh, poisoning it with God's Body and Blood in the Sacrament, shouting it away with the promises of His Word. There's only one place to run when death looms, when death strikes, and that's to God, who can pry death's bony fingers off of you with His strong-to-save pierced hands, whether through His pastors or His printed Word.

I didn't know what else to do when I saw that accident on Friday. Without thinking, with nothing I could do, I think I did the right thing. I ran back to the cross. There was no magic or superstition. There was a reminder of my Baptism, a confession of where my life, the lives of my children, and

the lives of those involved in the accident were bought and saved, and there was a prayer, a prayer rooted in the heart and core of God's promises: His cross.

Are you ready? Paul thinks you are, or at least you can be today: *"If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you."*

I wouldn't trade the sign of the cross for anything, for signs point you in the right direction: that's the whole point of them. You've run in the right direction today, and you've run to the right place. Today Jesus fattened death's lip. On Good Friday, He will cut out its heart. Here is *"the Resurrection and the Life."* Enjoy life in Christ, just like you found it. Amen.