

Lectionary 24 A 2020 (Modified)

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

September 13, 2020

John 12:23-26

“Out of Death, Life”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Although we have smoke in Tucson, we do not have wildfires in Tucson. The Bighorn Fire was scary for some of us. A few people in our congregation had to evacuate. It's scary to imagine the choices that you make. When the Bighorn fire struck, most of us got a warning. “Ready, set, go.” A few hours, maybe, to think about what to pack. Pets? Tax documents? Family heirlooms? Scary! But in California this week, I saw people in the news in their pajamas. They had to get out fast. No time to even think or pack.

But let's say that your home was destroyed by fire. Let's say no one was hurt or died. But your home was burned to the ground. If you have homeowner's insurance, the odds are you are going to get a big check. And although certain photos are irreplaceable. Certain family heirlooms are irreplaceable. But if you're lucky, and if you have been a wise homeowner, you're going to get a big check. And as you figure out where you are going to rebuild, and how you are going to rebuild, you may end up making some better choices. All of those mistakes that you made along the way— those leaky skylights that you installed in the nineties, that hot tub that you never use but has to be kept clean and heated, that green paint in the hallway that was supposed to look elegant but looks more like split pea soup? And the fireplace that doesn't create any heat, but does create plenty of carbon monoxide? And that wrought iron detailing that was supposed to evoke the Hispanic heritage of the Old Pueblo but turned out to be a death trap for pets and for toddlers? You now get a do-over. You've been through loss. You've been traumatized. But at least in some matters, you get a do-over.

And as you grieve your losses, after this fire, you are negotiating with insurance adjusters and contractors, and you are rebuilding your home... As these things are happening, you look around. At all the people who did not have insurance. Or who lost loved ones. And you realize that despite your losses, and despite your pain, and despite your gray hairs, your household has come through this ordeal. And your household has been transformed. And now you must go forward in a new way. In a new direction.

Today's message is, “Out of death, life.” The central message of the Christian religion is crucifixion and resurrection. There is life beyond death. But first, we die. *“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”* That's the core truth. There is no resurrection without death. Death is swallowed up in

resurrection. But they go together. One coin with two sides. The house burns down. But a new home is built. And it can be built back stronger and better than before.

Out of death, life. Now for the world in general, and society in general, and people in general, this is a useful metaphor. For example, a lot of people have been working from home. Those fortunate enough to have jobs. When it's safe to work in busy offices again, will those workers want to? Will they be happier at home? Perhaps more productive at home? What will that mean for owners of large office buildings? Or will there be a renewed interest in working together, in having face-to-face meetings? Will everybody, at long last, be so sick of the internet that they crave in-person meetings?

We've been learning the opposite with schools. In-person, in-class learning is vastly superior to online learning for the majority of children. We didn't know that. I didn't know that. Until now. So schools will learn a lot from this. Businesses will learn a lot. Medicine will learn a lot. And churches will learn a lot. Out of death, life. Now for the world in general, for society, for people, this is a useful metaphor. But for the church, for you, for me, it isn't just a metaphor. It is a promise. Out of death, life.

Our congregation has been through the wildfire. Things that matter to us— our routines, our traditions, our comfortable rhythms— have been burned away. We've lost a great deal, as a congregation, as a community of faith. As have virtually all communities of faith— Catholic, Jewish, Evangelical, Muslim. But we have homeowner's assurance. The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our stronghold.

People are always asking me about "re-opening." Members of the congregation, members of the public, members of my family. My Mom's church in Texas, a United Methodist congregation, re-opened its worship services a month ago. "When is Dove of Peace going to re-open?" That is not the question. The question is when and how God is going to RESURRECT, not re-open, our public worship services. Not re-open. But resurrection.

Steven Jobs, the founder of Apple, was famous for quoting Henry Ford. Henry Ford said, "If I'd ask customers what they wanted, they would've told me a faster horse." There's been a tendency for churches and Christians to think that a day would soon come when everything would return to the way it was before. It would all be over soon. And not only would it all be over soon, there would be no cost. No change required. Resurrection without death. That's not the promise, though, is it? Gain without loss, life without death, victory without struggle. Show me where Jesus said that. Show me where the prophets said that. The politicians, yes, in all parties, the politicians promise that. That's not God's promise.

"When is Dove of Peace going to re-open?" If the question means on what date are we going to throw open the doors and pretend like none of this ever happened, I'm not able to provide an answer. I am authorized to make two guarantees. That in the resurrection, things will be better than they were before. And that in the resurrection, things will be different than they were

before. Those are the promises, that by my calling as a pastor, I am authorized to make.

I can imagine smaller gatherings, such as the one we have right now in this service. Very restricted. With a mission to nourish and evangelize the people watching and listening online. I can imagine smaller gatherings, and outdoor gatherings, about a month from now. Maybe even in the winter if *La Niña* does what it looks like she wants to do. *La Niña* will mean a sunny, mild winter in Arizona. (And maybe a bitter winter in the upper midwest, so maybe some of our favorite snowbirds will be in a hurry to migrate back.) And I can imagine an ongoing commitment to continuous improvement of our technical capacities to connect with people by internet, by email, by text message, and by phone. It's what we should have been doing long ago. My sabbatical six years ago gave me time to study and experiment with these technologies. But for me, as for many pastors who return from sabbaticals, the written and unwritten expectations of a pastor crowd out the time and energy for creativity. But now those skills are more needed than ever. And I anticipate that it will be a long time before some of our members with health complications can come back. Like many months, or even a couple of years. And. Even before Covid, we had evangelism challenges. So I can imagine a real effort now, to really do outreach with technology. An effort that has already been underway for months.' And you are part of it in this moment.

I can imagine. I can't promise. "When is Dove of Peace going to re-open?" I know people are kind and respectful when they ask that question. And I want to kindly and respectfully suggest that's not the right question. The biblical question, the godly question, concerns death and resurrection. Loss. Grief. And then the new life that God gives. Maybe the right questions are "What have we lost temporarily?" "What have we lost forever?" "What new things are possible now that were not possible before?" "Is there manna enough for today?" "If we are the body of Christ, if we are God's hands, how can we come together to serve a world of pain?"

How blessed are those who have homeowner's insurance. If you have homeowner's insurance, you can rebuild better and newer than before. Still how much more blessed in the Church, to have God's *ASSURANCE*. That through the grave we pass into something greater. Out of death, life. Amen.