

The Comfort of Our Hope

By Linda Rex

November 12, 2023, Proper 27 | After Pentecost—Today as I write this blog, my neighbors and friends are celebrating All Hallow's Eve (Halloween). Here in America, this celebration has become a big deal, and is promoted vigorously by stores and other commercial enterprises, who sell anything from costumes, to food products, and of course, a wide variety of Halloween candy and toys.

Personally, I believe we do not want to celebrate or venerate evil or death. But we do want to be realistic about our human condition, which involves death and dying. In my life, lately, I have had to grieve multiple losses, and some of those losses have involved losing dear ones to death. Death is an evil that has been allowed into our human existence, and is something everyone of us has to face at some point. For some of us, death is something we'd rather not talk about or face. For others of us, it is something we have had to deal with more than once, and is a normal part of our existence.

When the apostle Paul wrote to the members at Thessalonica, he was answering questions about what happens to people when they die. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, Paul wrote that he did not want the believers to be ignorant of what happens to people who are dead, whether spiritually or physically. He did not want the believers to feel hopeless or face death without some sense of comfort. So he reminded them of the central foundation stone of their faith—the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Using the euphemism of sleep, Paul showed that death was no longer their master. Because Jesus Christ took on our human flesh and died the death we all will one day die, death became something new. Jesus went into death and out the other side into new life, bringing our human flesh with him into a place of eternal life in face-to-face union with his Father in the Spirit. Death, then, is powerless in the face of Jesus' death and resurrection. Death has lost its sting. It has no hold on us.

We find hope in the reality that all of humanity has died in Jesus and risen in Jesus. Because of this, as Jesus says in John 5:28b-29, “an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.” Because of Jesus, there will be a resurrection of every person.

What happens then will be determined by Jesus, for he has born all our sins and is offering to every person eternal life—knowing and being known by him and his Father, in the Spirit (Jn. 17:3). The writer of Hebrews says, “And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Heb 9:27-28 NRSV). Jesus has already dealt with sin through his death and resurrection. Now he is drawing all men to himself.

As we trust in Jesus, in the reality of our inclusion in his death and resurrection, we participate in his own face-to-face relationship with his Father in the Spirit. This means we begin, by faith, to experience eternal life in the Spirit even now, as a foretaste of what we will experience for all eternity. This union and communion with God through Jesus in the Spirit which we participate in even now by faith in Christ is what we will live in for all eternity—this is a gift. It cannot be earned.

And as a gift, our participation in Christ's own relationship with his Father in the Spirit, is not automatic. As Paul explains in 2 Cor. 5:18-21, God has reconciled every person to himself in Jesus Christ, therefore each of us needs to, by faith in Christ, be reconciled to God. It is a relationship which requires participation by both sides. God has done all that is needed on his side. Now we embrace the gift given to us in Jesus and begin living it out by faith, participating in the reality of all he has done for us in his life, death, resurrection and ascension, and in the gift of the Spirit.

We stand with open hands, receiving this incredible gift given so freely, and begin living in the truth of it. And we live in the truth of that life now and on into eternity in Christ. Death has, indeed, lost its sting (1 Cor. 15:55). Death has no power over us any longer. In Christ, we have hope, and this is our comfort when faced with death and dying.

Heavenly Father, thank you for delivering us from death through your Son Jesus. Thank you that by your Spirit, we can live in the truth even now of the eternal life in face-to-face relationship with you offered to us through Jesus' death and resurrection. We receive, by faith, your gracious gift and ask for the grace to live in the truth of who you have declared us to be—your very own beloved adopted children, in Jesus' name. Amen.

“But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.” 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 NRSV