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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

June 27, 2021

Year B, Proper 8, Track 2, Revised Common Lectionary

[Wisdom of Solomon 1:13-15; 2:23-24](#)

[Psalm 30](#)

[2 Corinthians 8:7-15](#)

[Mark 5:21-43](#)

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There's a theologian I like to read sometimes named James Alison. He's a fascinating character: a Roman Catholic priest, openly gay, something of a thorn in the side of the hierarchy. He insists that God is absolutely free of violence; that there's no retribution in God, that God is a God of life, not of death. And he uses a funny word about God: "effervescent." Over and over he calls God "ineffably effervescent." And I love it because it makes me imagine God as a kind of heavenly Alka-Seltzer tablet. Which is comical, on the one hand, but on the other, have you seen what happens when you drop an Alka-Seltzer tablet into water? It's an incredible frenzy of bubbles that just keeps pouring forth. And it reminds me of the passage in John's gospel where Jesus says, "The living water I give will become in you a fountain of water, bubbling up to eternal life."<sup>1</sup> And I love this image of a God who just never stops bubbling up life for us.

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<sup>1</sup> John 4:14.

We get a hint of this effervescent God in the passage we heard today from the Wisdom of Solomon, one of the books of what's called the Apocrypha, books written in Greek by Jewish authors, later than the Hebrew Scriptures but earlier than the New Testament. "God did not make death," our author says. Just a kind of flat-out statement. Death isn't from God. "God created all things that they might exist."

Now our selection today skips over some verses where the author imagines the response of some people who don't see it that way. They say, "Life is short and sorrowful: we were born just by chance, and when we're gone it will be like we'd never been. Consciousness is just a random side effect of our beating hearts; when that stops our bodies will turn into ashes and our life will pass away like mist." It's an amazing passage because it expresses a view that I think much of the world around us holds today, that the material world is all there is, we're here for no particular reason, and when we're gone we're gone. So, these imagined people say, let's eat, drink, and be merry while we're here. So far, fair enough. Then as the passage goes on they turn more cynical. "Let's oppress the poor man and rob the widow. After all, might makes right." And finally they see a righteous man and hate him so much they ambush, torture, and kill him.

Now I don't think atheism is actually just a gateway drug to becoming a sociopath. After all I live in California. At least half of all the loveliest, kindest people I know are atheists or agnostics. So I think our author's painted an unfairly black-and-white picture here. But what sticks with me about this passage is the kind of wistful sadness from *before* these imagined people go bad, the attitude of "We're here by chance, and this is all there is, so let's have a good life while we can before it all turns to smoke." And I think that resonates with a lot that people feel in our

society today: life has no true meaning, so we have to make our own, whether it's through pleasure, or devoting ourselves to a cause or ideology, or just hunkering down and trying to make a nice safe family life.

And the author of the Wisdom of Solomon just sweeps that away and says: No way. This is not all there is. You were made for eternity, so who you are and what you do today matters forever. Death isn't just something to be shrugged at or to get used to. We were made for life, and death is the enemy. It's a kind of bracing, optimistic, life-affirming statement and I find it really attractive.

In our gospel passage today we see a Jesus who seems to be a kind of effervescent fountain of life. Everywhere he goes he brings healing. The woman with the hemorrhage just has to creep up and touch his robe without him even knowing it and she's cured. And then the touch of his hand brings a little girl back from death itself. It's as if his very body is a kind of irresistible force of life that spreads to everything it touches. It really works with James Alison's effervescence and with the Wisdom of Solomon's perspective about death being the enemy and God being all about life. It's powerful. And I'd like to end the sermon there, and say Jesus is the unfailing cure for everything, even death itself; and in the sacraments, where we touch Jesus, we have the medicine of immortality; so be baptized and receive communion and you'll experience perfect healing of anything that's ever harmed you.

Of course it's not quite that simple.

Because how many hemorrhaging women in Israel that day went unhealed? How many little girls died and weren't raised?

And in the years since then, how many faithful, loving, people have seen their prayers go apparently unanswered? Have suffered themselves or seen their loved ones suffer?

“God did not make death,” says the Wisdom of Solomon. Yet when you think about it, God’s world includes an awful lot of death, even runs on it. Plants die so animals can live, animals die so other animals can live, generations give way to generations. Evolution depends on death, even massive amounts of death, new forms of life bursting forth, flourishing, and disappearing. And presumably even this hemorrhaging woman and this little girl who had their lives restored still died one day. For that matter, so did Jesus.

Maybe one way to make sense of death is to think about death with a little d, and Death with a capital D. Little-d death is the end of physical processes, the return of a living body to the elements. Little-d death is part of the circle of life. But then there’s big-D Death. Big-D Death is the death of self. It’s extinction. It’s what the writer Madeleine L’Engle calls being “Xed”—being crossed out of the story. Being gone, forgotten, lost, separated from God. Big-D Death is where the horror of death comes from. In the powerful story of Genesis, Adam and Eve are created mortal, subject to little-d death. There’s a suggestion that they might become immortal by eating from the tree of life, but before they do it, they break with God, and now suddenly little-d death comes together with big-D death. Suddenly death has its horror, death has its sting. And people have been trying to find a way to escape it ever since.

Think of the stories about Ponce de Leon and the other European colonizers looking for a mythical Fountain of Youth, a place with magical waters that could heal the body and make people young again. They wanted to stave off little-d death. They never found it, of course. Neither will we.

What we can say is that Jesus is an effervescent fountain of life—not just little-l life, but capital-L Life. Sometimes in his ministry here on earth that fountain did burst out to cure people. And from time to time ever since, God has used prayer to do the same thing. It does happen. But it's never for certain. Because there's a difference between curing and healing. Curing is about saving people from little-d death. It's a blessing and a wonder. But healing is about something deeper. It's about being restored to right relationship with others and with God, the God who can carry us through death. People can be cured, but they will still die one day. And what those cures really are are signs of the truer, deeper healing from big-D Death.

At the cross Jesus met big-D Death and took it captive, took away its sting. In him we will never be separated from God or from one another. We will never be Xed. When our mortal bodies lie in death, as they will, our spirits can yet rest in the God who will raise us up on the last day.

“Christ has risen from the dead,” goes the old Orthodox chant; “trampling down death by means of death; and upon those in the tombs, bestowing life.” May we drink deeply from his ever-bubbling fountain. And then may we live as people who need not fear death, and who know that not only we but every single one of God's beloveds is precious, because we are made for God's eternity.