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Peace, Sun Prairie  
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Pentecost 15

Judges 16:22-31

LORD, NOW LET YOUR SERVANT  
DEPART IN PEACE

I did not know the second part of the movie, “The Wizard of Oz,” was in color when I was a boy. I didn’t understand the impact on the story when Dorothy stepped out of her tornado-blown house after it landed and saw the beautiful world of Oz. We had a black and white television back then.

It was before the days when our nervous systems were benumbed by sensory overload from so many rapid fire special effects, computer games and social media distractions.

Therefore, something that did make a lasting impact on me were some color pictures in our family Bible. It was one of those old thick volumes with a few classic prints of Bible scenes interspersed throughout. They really

jumped out because they were such brilliant, vivid depictions it seemed as though they were spilling out of the page. The one that fascinated me most was the picture of Samson. His contorted, anguished face was aimed upward as though making a plea. His bulging, knotted arms flexed as he was pushing out on either side of him the center section of two massive stone pillars. Above and around him were all kinds of people with terrified looks on their faces falling from an upper tier, some of them head first, as the temple structure was collapsing.

I used to stare at that page when no one was watching. The fact that it fascinated me made me feel somehow naughty. Though there was no blood or gore, I think the sheer violence of the scene was something I was not accustomed to.

What were Samson's last words? "Let me die with the Philistines!"

Would it surprise you that you express the same sentiment as Samson each time you worship here? It happens right after the Lord's Supper when you sing, "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace."

That might sound surprising. Perhaps you always perceived those words as just nice, just a pleasant reflection after receiving the Lord's Supper. "I feel at peace, Lord." Most certainly that sentiment is there.

At the same time, however, the words, "Lord, now you let your servant depart in peace," are some of the heaviest words of the entire liturgy. You are saying, "Lord, I am ready to die now. However that may happen -whether in a car accident, or withering in old age, or being ravaged by cancer, or by a sudden heart attack, or in my sleep, or even, if necessary, I'm ready to die violently with the Philistines. Your Holy Supper has made me ready." We're expressing what Jesus said in the Gospel Lesson today: *Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.* His Supper has set us up for that.

You see, those words were first spoken by Simeon in the temple courts of Jerusalem when we held the baby Jesus in his arms. God had revealed to Simeon that he wouldn't die before he had seen the promised Christ with his own eyes. The Bible says he spoke those words being filled with the Holy Spirit, "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace."

That might sound confusing. We're asking God to let us depart in peace, aren't we? Not violently. And there's the rub. God never promised we wouldn't die violently or painfully. That's a fact that may understandably trouble us -and that's OK not to be comfortable with that. But even if you die in your sleep -the best that any of us could hope for -even then, there is still no such thing as a non-violent death. To have your soul ripped from your body -that's a violent thing. Even Jesus recoiled at that reality.

What's more, just like Samson, so often our deaths are also surrounded by suffering that is an earthly consequence of our own life sins. Due to a life of smugness and promiscuity Samson, who was supposed to be a leader of God's people Israel to conquer the Philistines, had been captured, shackled and had his eyes gouged out by the Philistines. He had been reduced to hard labor. Here he was in a temple praise service thanking a false Philistine god for Samson's defeat. A main feature of this event was to humiliate and laugh at this pathetic, helpless, lonely figure who once had been such a fearsome superhero.

In the same way, sometimes our sins follow us to the grave. Perhaps we suffer health problems due to a

lifetime of substance abuse, or we die utterly alone from a lifetime of alienating our loved ones. Sometimes our sins don't follow us in any visible way, but they weigh on us in the form of guilt. In that final struggle for our souls, Satan makes that last push and heightens our awareness of our messy lives to cause us to despair. The part that hurts and alarms the most is that Satan is right. Our sins are real. And they are ugly.

But note something in Samson's final words. It seems Samson is OK with his own death. As violent as the circumstances were, you might even say he was at peace with it. Why? How? Samson's sufferings had humbled him. He was well aware what his sins deserved. He was well aware God's judgment on sinners: The soul that sins shall die. But he was also well aware that the God he cried out to is Mercy. He was well aware that Jehovah whom he served promised to send a Savior. Samson was well aware that for the sake of this future Savior, Samson's sins were forgiven. He could appeal to God's mercy and be confident of it. In view of that promised Savior, God was not at odds with Samson. God didn't have it in for Samson. God wasn't holding a grudge against Samson or punishing Samson. God was at peace with Samson. Because of God's glorious mercy and forgiveness, not only would

Samson's seemingly ignominious death result in a powerful and glorious defeat of Israel's enemy, but Samson himself would be brought into the never-fading, all-surpassing glory of heaven. Samson was receiving a glorious salvation that he knew he didn't deserve and you might say he concluded, "It is well with my soul."

Our sins are real. The consequences of our sins are real. Death is real. But we have a Savior who took on Himself the blame for our sins and atoned for them. God's judgment was aimed at Him as He suffered and died on the cross. Christ died in judgment so you and I wouldn't have to. We are free from judgment. Our sins may follow us up to the grave, but not one step beyond that. We are forgiven. What's more, Christ is our super-Samson. He not only collapsed death itself but rose up out of the rubble to live for all eternity.

Whenever you and I have the Lord's Supper, Christ makes you a personal participant, a personal recipient of His death and His resurrection. For you receive the body and blood not just of a dead Jesus but of a living Jesus. Through that Sacrament Christ gives you forgiveness for all your sins so that you are assured God is not at odds with you. You are not under God's

disapproval, not under His frown, not flung aside by His indifference to you. He is at peace with you, regardless of the circumstances of your death. All is well because God is well with you. He wants you to know that personally, which is why He says, “Take and eat. Take and drink.” In the Lord’s Supper God’s peace means He fills you with new life, rescue from death and the devil, and bestows on you the anticipation of the resurrection to come. On that day when Christ visibly returns on the clouds of heaven, you and Samson and all believers in Jesus will rise from our graves in brilliant glory and the most vivid color to rule alongside Jesus in His Kingdom forever.

God is at peace with you. All is well. Here, eat and drink. No matter what happens. Whether you live or die, whether it’s happy or sad, hard or easy, scary or mundane, your sins are forgiven. God has only good intentions toward you. Your eternal future is secure. That’s reason enough to say, “Yes, I’m ready Lord. I have all that I need. Lord, Now let your servant depart in peace.”