

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost • July 19, 2009

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Ephesians 2:1-10

“Walking by Faith: Dead Man Walking”

Have you ever felt it – late at night, after watching a scary movie (which didn't seem like a bad idea at the time)? You hear the creak of a floorboard when you're alone in the dark, and a shiver runs up your spine. You get that feeling that they might be out there, in the black of night, closing in on every side... the walking dead! Zombies: undead creatures who know nothing but the hunger for “braaaaainns.”

The very concept of zombies, the walking dead who are animated by some supernatural force to rise up from the ground, is grounded in our fear of death and what it means to die. In some ways, they're a manifestation of the “valley of the shadow of death” or “valley of deep darkness” that David wrote of in Psalm 23. They're scary because they're dangerous, violent, and relentless – they just keep coming. Now, that didn't use to be so bad. Back in the day of “Night of the Living Dead,” zombies were slow, shambling things. If they came to a fence, they wouldn't jump it, though they might take a minute to knock it down. Zombies were lousy swimmers, too, as far as I can tell; but they might just walk along the bottom of a lake or river to get to the other side in their never-ending pursuit of “braaaaainns.” But the times have changed, and zombies – never ones to be left behind for too long – have changed with them. If you've seen the music video of Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, you know that zombies can now dance (and how!). The walking dead didn't stop there, though. In the past decade or so, zombies have experienced something of a renaissance – a rebirth, if you will. Today's zombies can run *and* jump. If they were a threat before, how much more should they be feared now?

Did you know that zombies show up in the New Testament? St. Paul writes about just this in our epistle lesson today: our reading from Ephesians 2 opens up with a discussion of, quite literally, the walking dead. Zombies are around us, all driven by an insatiable desire. But instead of an appetite for “braaaaainns,” they might be looking for “monnnneey,” “pleaaaasure,” “authorrriiity,” or maybe “coffffeeeee.” And they're a little more discreet than what we see in the movies. They look just like regular human beings – because they *are* regular human beings. Many of the people that we know are, in fact, the walking dead, slaves the spirit of this world.

When I was in Haiti a few months ago, I learned that the Haitian people knew about zombies, too. Driving through the countryside, our team saw a number of homes that were little more than shanties; however, small brick and cement structures stood by, carefully whitewashed and maintained and decorated, like little houses. Asking, we learned that these little buildings served as the family tomb. Most of the Haitian people believe in voodoo, and they fear the powers of the witch doctor. Should the witch doctor be able to spirit away the body of the deceased, people said, he could raise them as a zombie to be his slave. The family tomb served as a vault to protect the bodies of the dead. For people that have known many forms of oppression and subjugation in life, slavery in the afterlife as a zombie is understandably something to be feared. But why should we care about the slavery of the walking dead?

Are you a zombie? Do you still chase after the desires of the body and act on the impulses of the mind? That's the reality of everyone who is outside of Christ: shambling around in a never-ending pursuit of some kind of fulfillment, they follow the passions of the flesh, seeking to satisfy the urges that rise up in their thoughts in hope for some kind of respite. Have you ever heard of a zombie who, having finally taken the “braaaaainns” for which he hungered, just sits down and says, “Well, *that* hit the spot. I'm feeling much better now! Maybe I'll go on vacation and leave the rest of the

folks in that abandoned house alone.”? “Walking death” doesn’t work that way. The zombie can’t stop because the hunger never ends – fulfillment never comes. It’s slavery. Even a Christian might gaze into the mirror at times and wonder if they’re looking upon the walking dead. Sometimes it might seem like you or I are running back to zombie-hood and the trespasses that were our part of our nature. We keep feeling the urge to fall back into walking death.

In the *Holy Conversation* Sunday-morning adult education class this weekend, we look at how we can talk about the nature of those very same “trespasses and sins” that St. Paul mentions. In order to do just that with people unfamiliar with these concepts, we need to understand what we’re talking about. Think about it in zombie terms: they see what they want (e.g., “braaaaainnns”), and are willing to cross any boundary (e.g., fence, river, locked door) to get to it. In the same way, human beings are tempted to go over the boundaries that God has established in pursuit of some kind of fulfillment. If we’re acting like an up-to-date zombie, we might just jump the fence to steal what we want. If we’re feeling old-fashioned, though, we’re liable just to smash through whatever’s in our path, relentlessly moving towards our objective without regard for God’s good boundaries. When people, Christians included, go outside God’s design for our relationships with Him and with the people around us, we’re trespassing. We’re trying to satisfy our hunger, acting like the walking dead.

God gives life to those who were dead: this is the central point in Paul’s message here in Ephesians 2. But just as the dead cannot come to life through their own power, human beings can’t come to God. He comes to us. That’s grace. That is God giving us what we don’t deserve: life. **In Christ**, we who once were dead are raised – not undead, but truly alive for the first time. **In Christ**, we who once felt boundlessly deep hunger are fulfilled – not by things that don’t last, but in relationship with God Himself. Human beings are designed to be in relationship with our Creator, and He sits us down by His side. **In Christ**, we who were once slaves are set free – from the oppression of our old desires, from obedience to the impulses that commanded us to jump the fences and smash down the doors. In Christ, we are not decaying zombies but new creations! By grace we are saved through faith, as God’s gift.

The walking dead don’t stand a chance before God. When the Holy Spirit takes hold of them and puts faith in once-dead hearts and minds, He works a change. The passions of our flesh give way to new impulses. Instead of trespassing and taking that which is not rightly ours, we’re moved to protect the people around us, even doing acts of kindness – *even* if there’s nothing for us to gain in doing so. We walk by faith in Christ, living as his people in the world. We are given a new direction: no longer chasing after the things we think would liberate us, we are set free to do good works in love. The time that you would spend as the walking dead is now time that can be used to really live. How is the Spirit prompting you? What has God set before you in life as an opportunity to serve?

God has prepared good works in which we should walk, we who are no longer zombies but willing workers, that we might use our hearts, hands, and – yes – even our “braaaaainnns.”

Amen.