
IF I SHOULD DIE BEFORE I WAKE

When I was a kid, my parents taught me the bedtime prayer:

“Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the LORD my soul to keep.

If I should die before I wake, I pray the LORD my soul to take.”

- Recently, I have seen a version of that prayer where the second line is changed to: *“Guide me safely through this night and wake me with the morning light.”*
 - Now while I never thought about the fact that I was praying about a somewhat ominous possibility—*if I should die*—perhaps this change is appropriate because certainly death has no place in a child’s bedroom.
 - At the same time, I can’t help but wonder if this change reflects the mood of the times.
 - On the one hand, we seem to have a nearly insatiable appetite for graphic images of violence and death in our television, movies, video games, and news.
 - On the other hand, we seem to be increasingly in avoidance of the more common, everyday variety of death that awaits each of us.
 - For example, though you can request it, the policy of the cemetery in Lompoc, where I previously served, is that any service done there be away from the graveside, and for family not to be present when the casket is lowered into the ground.
 - Hospitals speak not of patients dying but instead of them expiring.
 - The military does not report deaths; instead, they give the number of casualties.
 - Even in the church, marriage vows are no longer made “until death parts us” but more often with the promise to “share our joys and sorrows and all that the years may bring.”

It is in this light that we celebrate All Saints Sunday today.

- Today, we lift up the stark reality of our mortality by remembering all those who have died, rather than those who have expired or passed away or been lost like a favorite piece of jewelry.
 - Today our minds turn especially to those family and friends who have been taken from us by death,
 - and especially those who have died in the faith or, as I prefer to say, who have entered the Church Triumphant.
 - Many here can offer the names of dear ones from family or the larger church who have died in the past year.

I think it is worth noting, though, that the color for All Saints Day is not the black of Good Friday and mourning,

- but rather the white of Easter and resurrection.

For on this day, we do not merely acknowledge death; we also place it in its proper context in light of the ONE who had power over death:

- the ONE who in today’s gospel raises Lazarus from death to life,
- the ONE whose own death and resurrection gives witness to the promise made in the first reading that GOD will one day bring an end to the reign of death,
 - and cause all mourning and sorrow to cease,
 - and wipe every tear from our eyes.

It is in the light of Easter dawn that we confront the darkness of death.

- And it is from this side of CHRIST's resurrection that we gain the courage, not to deny death, but to defy it,
 - to challenge its ability to overshadow and distort our lives,
 - because the risen CHRIST has promised us that death does not have the final word.
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What a difference this makes!

- Not just in our attitude about death, but also about life,
 - because on this day, just as on Easter, we recall most powerfully that we are the ones who have been joined through Holy Baptism into CHRIST's death *and* resurrection.
 - In Romans 5:3-4, Paul writes, *"Do you not know that all those who have been baptized into CHRIST JESUS were baptized into HIS death? Therefore we have been buried with HIM by baptism into death, so that, just as CHRIST was raised from the dead by the power of the FATHER, we too might walk in newness of life."*
 - Through baptism, we have been promised not only eternal life in the future but also abundant life here and now!
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This means at least two things for us as followers of CHRIST:

- First, it says something of the truth about death.

For we who "walk wet," as I like to say—who live in the fullness of our baptism into CHRIST—death no longer terrifies us.

The people in JESUS' day could not say the same thing.

- For example, the death of Lazarus was the final word.

In v. 37 of today's gospel, some even said, "Could not HE who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

- Clearly, they acknowledged JESUS' power and authority over blindness and sickness.
 - If JESUS had been there when Lazarus was still alive, JESUS could have healed him, and he would not have died.
 - But now, Lazarus was dead—in fact, four days dead.
 - JESUS can handle sickness and disease, but nobody is that good!
 - JESUS, however, was and is—so, HE called Lazarus back, not just from a few minutes or even hours of death.
 - Lazarus was really dead and had been for days, but the power of JESUS can defeat death, no matter how permanent it seems.
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Promised a share of CHRIST's resurrection, we can do something they couldn't before the resurrection:

- We can look even death in the eye and not blink.
 - We can wait for JESUS to arrive, knowing that HE has the power to call the dead back to life.
 - And for this reason, while we mourn the death of our loved ones,
 - we can also celebrate their triumph, their victory, as from their labors they now rest and live with CHRIST in glory!
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The second thing that our baptism into CHRIST's death and resurrection means for us, and perhaps what is even more important than this truth about death, is the truth about life.

For those who walk wet, even more important than the fact that death no longer terrifies us is the truth that life no longer terrifies us.

- That may sound strange, but consider what JESUS' victory over death means for us as we live our lives in the here and now,
 - to claim the true significance of this day—All Saints Sunday.

Because of our baptism into the resurrection of JESUS, death is no longer the final word.

- And that can give us courage:
 - courage to face the hardships and disappointments of this life;
 - courage to go to new places and do things we would otherwise never have tried;
 - courage to look even death in the face and then to turn our gaze heavenward, celebrating what CHRIST's victory over death means for us.

Because of our baptism into the resurrection of JESUS, we can look at even the most mundane activities and see them as opportunities to take them on as saintly activities,

- and to live with and for all the saints.
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Saints are not only those in the Bible or Church history who did extraordinary things.

- Nor are Saints only those who died for their faith.
- Saints are not even only those who are of such significant moral courage, kindness, or discipline that they set the example for the rest of us.
 - Rather, saints are also—and especially—*all* those who have been baptized into CHRIST.

Our word, “saint,” comes from a Greek word meaning “holy ones.” (Does that sound like you?)

And that Greek word comes from a Hebrew word that means “set apart” for the LORD to use. (Does that sound like you?)

- In Holy Baptism, you see, each of us was set apart—consecrated—named—called—and commissioned by GOD to be GOD's children—GOD's partners—and GOD's co-workers in the world.
 - In Holy Baptism, each of us was made a saint—a holy one set apart for the LORD to use.
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Simply because GOD has set us apart and called us “saints” in baptism, we have GOD's promise that GOD will use us—our talents, our abilities, our interests—our whole lives—to further GOD's will.

- This not only gives our lives meaning, but it also conveys tremendous significance upon our daily routine and on all our roles—person, parent, spouse, child, citizen, employer, employee, co-worker, volunteer, friend, and so many others.
 - These are the places and identities in which we do, literally, holy work—that is the work that GOD has set us apart to do—because it is work that needs holy people.
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All Saints Day is our day, as we see ourselves to be among those who have been set apart to do GOD's work in the world,

- those whom GOD has appointed,
- those whom GOD has promised to accompany through all of our living and our dying, unto new life,
- and those who are joined to all the faithful who have lived, labored, and died in the faith before us.

All Saints Day is our day as we look death in the face and say, “You don't scare me any longer,”

- and look life in the face and say, “You don't scare me either because I am one of GOD's chosen, a holy saint,
 - set apart and sent to work and play, laugh and love, sing and praise in the name of the ONE who says, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of GOD?”

If I should die before I wake, I know the LORD my soul will take.