Death, Life, and Baptism (1)

Colleagues,

A brilliant full moon made shadows on the snow in Northeastern Ohio a week ago last night. The sight was beautiful. Tonight we're well into the waning, a persistent reminder to people like me, on the far side of 45, that darkness comes soon. Too soon.

Our topic for the next three weeks is death, and God's response to it in Jesus Christ. The timeliness of the topic will be obvious. We are barreling toward Holy Week, with its capstone in the great Three Days—the Triduum, as the in-crowd likes to say. Here is our annual plunge into the core of the Christian faith, the astonishing assertion, spelled out at length from Maundy Thursday through Holy Saturday, that, in the crucifixion of Jesus the Jew, none other than God Almighty was sucked into the black hole that sin swirls into deadly, crushing existence; whereupon God did the impossible and broke the hole open. That he did this "for us and for our salvation" is certified by the baptisms that are always remembered and sometimes administered at Easter Vigil services.

Today's writer, Craig F. Simenson, joins Luther and a great host of others, both historical and contemporary, in arguing that Christian people need to pay attention to these matters not once a year but every day. Simenson's case for this is laid out in a four-year-old paper that served as his Senior Thesis at Harvard Divinity School. In it he drives toward a specific proposal for using the classic offices of Morning and Evening Prayer to get people doing this. Of greater interest to you in these weeks of Lent will be the rationale he assembles for pushing the proposal. Many of you will find much of it to be familiar stuff. Still, read anyway, and see how a gifted and well-read seminarian puts the argument together for the decade we're in

and the generation he represents. We think you'll learn some things along the way, and you'll certainly emerge on the other end thanking God for Craig, and for all others who are using the waxing phase of their living-into-death to grab hold of the Gospel, make it their own, and pass it along as others have before them.

Three quick words, the first about procedure: Craig's paper is a long and meaty piece of work, so for Thursday Theology purposes we've carved out some key portions and will send you three of them between now and Holy Week. Another one or two may follow at some point in the Easter season. We'll see. If you'd like the paper in its entirety, drop a note to the undersigned at jburceATattDOTnet.

Second, a little bit about Craig, with more to follow in subsequent weeks. After earning his M.Div. at Harvard, he headed for a "Lutheran year"—a requirement for ordination in the ELCA—at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. That was followed by an internship in Nebraska and the course in Clinical Pastoral Education that the ELCA also requires of candidates for pastoral ministry. Exhilarated by that, he accepted an invitation to stick around for another year of chaplaincy work. Then it was back to Chicago to earn a Th.M. (Master of Theology) at LSTC. Last November the saints of Grace Lutheran Church in Darlington, Wisconsin, extended him a call. He began serving there early last month. By all means keep him in your prayers as he approaches his first encounter as a pastor with the rigors of Holy Week and Easter Sunday.

Finally, an apology: try as I might, I can't get my email program to assign Arabic numerals to Craig's several endnotes in place of the Roman ones that you'll struggle with here. Let me count on your patience.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

From **"'Make us Die Every Day': Baptism, Death, and Daily Prayer"**
Craig F. Simenson
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Introduction

Beginning to end, matters of life and death lie at the heart of Christianity. "By water and the Word, God delivers us from sin and death and raises us to new life in Jesus Christ… united with all the baptized in the one body of Christ."[i] So go the words that open the order of Holy Baptism among Lutherans in my own home tradition, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Similar refrains, however, can be heard proclaimed in different churches the world over at the event of Christian baptism. This baptismal language—of dying and rising, of death and rebirth—so familiar among the faithful down the centuries has long proclaimed that the two most undeniable poles of creaturely existence do not in truth exist independent from each other. Baptism makes clear that death is not merely the crucial transition at the end of life—not merely a key point of closure—but also an opening and the key turning point in the living out of all our days.

Still, many churches in the United States today are just as likely to avoid any careful and sustained consideration of what this baptismal link might mean for our own physical death. Instead, as suggested by many trends that have re-shaped the American funeral in the last century, it seems that we often live in the shadow of a culture fearfully in denial of death [Part I below], and one that frequently implies that our bodies are of secondary importance to the religious life [Part II, per next week's post —*ed*.]

Part 1. The American way of death denial: The modern funeral as case study

In his seminal work, The Denial of Death, Ernest Becker describes the terror of death as "one of the great rediscoveries of modern thought."[ii] Undoubtedly, at a "working level," our human aversion to death comes quite naturally and is often necessary for us to assume the various responsibilities of our everyday lives.[iii] Fear that is by all means natural and appropriate, however, arguably becomes deadening in much more deceiving forms when it veers towards a denial of our natural limits as beings that live and die. Left unexamined in the darkest corners of our daily lives, our unacknowledged fear of death is likely to overwhelm us in the end and operate in our lives now as an "endless source of bad decisions and selfish action"[iv]—what, in other words, Christians call "sin." Alarmingly, then, much evidence suggests that the American culture surrounding death today might most aptly be described as death denying. Against this larger societal backdrop, Christians need not think of a steady and honest encounter with death as either frightening or morbid. Rather, the vision of Christian baptism offers us a straightforward view of death so that we might live every day of our lives without fear—in the in-breaking light of God's tender compassion—empowered again and again to set our feet to walking in the ways of peace, joy and gratitude in this world (Luke 1.78-79).[v] Before turning to the scriptural basis and liturgical grounding for this baptismal vision in detail, I begin by looking more closely at some general trends in American funeral practices which suggest some of what I believe are the most problematic ways in which these popular practices conceal the realities of death and our healthy fear of it. Local church leaders interested in starting more engaged conversations within their communities about end-of-life issues and

funeral preparation for themselves or loved ones might take cues from the discussion below. However, raising greater awareness in our churches about the details of funeral practices and Christian teachings on death and life will likely benefit anyone struggling with the various forms of death present to us along just about every part of this life's journey.

Tracing a Christian pattern to death and the funeral

In Thomas G. Long's recent book, Accompany Them With Singing: The Christian Funeral, he argues that over the last two centuries Christian funeral practices in the U.S. have lost many of their distinctly Christian marks. Long notes that a basic and distinct Christian funeral rite—borrowing largely from first Hebrew and then Roman customs—can be detected by the late fourth century AD composed of three movements: preparation, processional and burial.[vi] Since these early beginnings, Christians have theologically framed funerals as the completion of baptism and the church's final procession with the dead to their burial, a movement of bodies accompanied simultaneously by both hope and grieving.[vii] Liturgically, the gospel script of Christ-crucified-and-resurrected-in-the-body was proclaimed in both words and action. Bodies of the dead in Christ were (at least gradually) not avoided to the extent dictated by other contemporary Hebrew customs concerned with the ritual impurity of corpses.[viii] Neither were the bodies treated as marginal to this particular phase on the journey of faith. We might even think of the dead as participants themselves in the funeral's witness to baptism's final call. According to Long, members of the *ekklesia* [house church/congregation] themselves prepared the bodies of their dead in their homes by washing, anointing and clothing them in linen cloth or eventually white garments signifying baptism.[ix] Church leaders such as Tertullian of Carthage, John Chrysostom and Augustine of Hippo advised that

Christians refrain from the loud cries of mourning or the dirges of flute players typical of Jewish and Roman traditions and express their sorrow instead with reverent silence, prayer, psalms and hymns.[x] Carrying the corpse with them, the community then proceeded to the gravesite together as an assembled body, before commending the dead to God and burying them in the earth. After placing the body in the ground, they would usually eat of the Lord's Supper—understood as Christ's body and blood—either at the grave or in the home.[xi]

For Long, this early pattern of the Christian funeral was based in the belief that the dead were saints, holy ones, children adopted by God, sisters and brothers to be accompanied in their union with the resurrected Christ, bodies worthy to be honored and embraced with tender care.[xii] Even in the midst of plague, a third-century letter by Dionysius of Alexandria suggests the lack of fear that characterized a Christian willingness to embrace the dead:

> *With willing hands they raised the bodies of the saints to their bosoms; they closed their eyes and mouths, carried them on their shoulders, and laid them out; they clung to them, embraced them, and wrapped them in grave clothes.[xiii]*

Moreover, while care of the dead who were of the "household of faith" was privileged above others, churches established a reputation in the Roman world for looking beyond their own membership. Controversial in their greater Roman milieu, Margaret Miles emphasizes that early churches volunteered to take care of the bodies of both their brothers and sisters, and anyone else around them in need.[xiv]

The neglected bodies of the dead

In contrast to this Christian rite of death, Long characterizes

Christian funerals today as increasingly mere memorial events—with the body cosmetically altered, sheltered in a tank-like casket or made near-completely invisible, and the service personalized to the point of marginalizing its larger baptismal backdrop.[xv] Often, rather than turning us to genuinely face the dead, such services tend to sentimentalize death and rely on loosely-biblical but popular notions of a heavenly "afterlife" divorced from any explicit reference to the triune God.[xvi] Traditional patterns still persist in many worship hymnals but, understandably, many Christian clergy have embraced these recent developments as preferable to the "older, often depersonalized, and more somber rituals of the past."[xvii] If done skillfully, I certainly agree with Long that many of these trends might be employed in ways that can accentuate the relevance of the dead's Christian witness to resurrection. Yet, in doing so, churches must be reminded that as Christians we testify to a bodily resurrection from the dead, a death already rehearsed in the sacrament of baptism and one that calls us to a straightforward encounter with our everyday fears.

These recent funeral trends within the church are, of course, part of a much larger shift within North American society as a whole. In her book, The American Way of Death Revisited, Jessica Mitford exposed several tenets of what she called the "new mythology, essential to the twentieth-century American funeral rite, [that] has grown up—or rather has been built up step-by-step—to justify the peculiar customs surrounding the disposal of our dead."[xviii] Indeed, funeral industry norms such as embalming or "burial vaults" deny (and even audaciously attempt to defy) the realities of human embodiment that involve inevitable physical decay. In the case of the "burial vault," these outer receptacles—made of a variety of durable materials and designed to protect the casket and the

body within it from the elements of disintegration during their "eternal sojourn in the grave"—once rare, are now required by most cemeteries.[xix]

While mandated neither by law or religious teaching,[xx] nor proven as an effective or even necessary guard against health and sanitation concerns, nor widely used anywhere outside of North America, embalming or "restorative art" is now so universal in the U.S. that for a long time funeral directors have done it routinely, without consulting the wishes of corpse or kin.[xxi] When American embalming was first introduced, and while still typically done in the home, Mitford notes that it was often expected that a family member would stay with the embalmer in order to witness the procedure.[xxii] Today, however, despite its popular perpetuation, few of us know any details about the practice. At bottom, though embalming seldom preserves bodies beyond the timeline of the funeral, the arduous chemical and cosmetic work involved is intended to present those mourning with a final beautiful, happy and healthy "memory picture" of the dead. On the one hand, embalming and the related American phenomena of the open-casket ceremony do not cast the body completely out of our view. This embalmed last glimpse, however, shows us neither the body we knew nor death's true face. Rather, we are presented with the person we loved concealed behind make-up and cosmetic alterations, and literally reduced to an emptied and then artificially-filled casing.[xxiii] Underlying this standard industry procedure is the insidious idea that the dead must be presented in "the semblance of normality… unmarred by the ravages of illness, disease or mutilation"—though few die (or live, for that matter) in a way that would actually fit this supposed "norm."[xxiv]

The neglected bodies of the living

Yet, funerals have become disembodied not only in the sense that the bodies of our dead have increasingly been disguised or made marginal but also, relatedly, in the sense that those mourning now have very little liturgical contact either with the bodies of the dead or their own bodies. Such disembodiment of the American funeral has taken hold in both our ritual language and practice. Linguistically, the plain and direct language of the past has largely been replaced with more "ornate" and euphemistic terminology: the "undertaker" has become the "funeral director" or "mortician," offering services in what has gone from being the "funeral parlor" to the "funeral home" to oftentimes now simply the "chapel";[xxv] coffins become "caskets"; hearses now known as "coaches" or "professional cars"; bodies of the dead generally referred to simply as "remains"; death itself spoken of as merely "passing away" or "expiration."[xxvi] Such language, much of it first spawned within various trade publications of the funeral industry, has trickled into popular culture in trends that have increasingly shielded those mourning from speaking directly to our fear of death. Granted, as Lathrop points out, the "hard and messy work of actually dying" is also not typically evoked in traditional Christian liturgy.[xxvii] Still, death remains a constant presence and integral element to the Christian scriptures, creeds and sacraments. Framed in this context, there is a strong precedent for church leaders to avoid slipping into misdirected turns of phrase that keep us unhelpfully circling around our fears of death.

Members of the church body have also accepted many funeral trends that have increasingly allowed us to avoid any physical contact with our dead, their coffins and the very earth into which they are buried.[xxviii] Though perhaps for more practical than theological reasons, American funerals and the handling of the dead up until the nineteenth century were still

performed largely by family and close friends. With remarkable parallels to the earlier-cited account of Dionysius, Mitford highlights that just over a hundred years ago in the U.S., it was family and friends who typically:

> *washed and laid out the body, draped it in a winding sheet, and ordered the coffin from the local carpenter. It was they who carried the coffin on foot from the home to the church and thence to the graveyard, and who frequently—unless the church sexton was available—dug the grave… Between the death and funeral, the body lay in the family parlor, where the mourners took turns watching over it, the practical reason for this being the ever-present possibility that signs of life might be observed.[xxix]*

Today, we have given this care for the dead over almost exclusively to professional funeral directors and "allied industries" such as cemeteries, florists, monument makers and vault manufacturers.[xxx] Friends and family—and even pallbearers—increasingly have merely "honorary" roles, as hydraulically operated devices or funeral professionals now typically prepare, transport, transfer, and bury our dead.[xxxi]

Obviously, as Long acknowledges, we do not have the option of "going back to a bygone era."[xxxii] Christian funerals will invariably be different now than they were centuries and even decades ago. Yet, for those of us who recognize the transformative value of understanding life and death in terms of an embodied, daily and baptismal journey towards God, I agree with Long that we can still find powerful ways to re-locate these traditional markers in the liturgy of the Christian funeral. To do so, however, I believe that we must also look beyond the funeral itself to face common misunderstandings

about the salvific role of the body and Christian baptism.

– to be continued

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[i] Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW) 2006: 227.

[ii] Becker 1973: 11.

[iii] Ibid. 2.

[iv] Lathrop 2006: 128.

[v] See Ibid. 127; Merton 1969: 86.

[vi] Long 2009: 71. Even earlier, at the beginning of the third century AD, Long highlights that Tertullian references an "appointed office" for Christian burial in North Africa." For full discussion on the origins of the Christian funeral, see 59-72.

[vii] Ibid. 71-72.

[viii] Long cites texts such as the fourth-century Apostolic Constitutions, marked by its strong rebuke of Jewish purity laws, as evidence that some Christians were apparently observing such practices (Ibid. 63-65). For two seemingly-opposing angles on the relevance of ritual purity within the NT itself, compare Matthew 23.27/Luke 11.44 (and the ritual significance they place on the unclean graves of the dead) against Mark 7.14-15 (and its apparent substitution of inward purity for external purity rules). Interestingly, each of these statements is in fact attributed to Jesus.

[ix] Admittedly, even among Christians, a family's wealth likely determined how elaborate the funeral ceremony would be and the extent to which family members personally attended to the dead body. See Ibid. 67, 69.

[x] Ibid. 69-70. Note Jesus' dismissal of the flute players and mournful tumult in Matt 9.23-24.

[xi] Long 2009: 71.

[xii] Ibid. 71-72. For this language of adoption into the "household of faith," see Galations 3.23-4.7.

[xiii] Long 2009: 65.

[xiv] Miles 2008: 13. "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Galatians 6.10).

[xv] Long 2009: 58. For important discussion on the rise of cremation in U.S., see Mitford 2000: 111-122, and Lynch 2010.

[xvi] Lathrop 2006: 127-128, but also Long 2009: 57-59.

[xvii] Ibid. 58-59. Importantly, Long notes that this modern shift is not completely universal throughout the U.S.—currently most pronounced among white, suburban Protestants, but not as prevalent in rural areas, among nonwhites, and Catholics. Still, Long warns that modern trends are increasingly changing funeral practices for all Christians.

[xviii] Mitford 2000: 15-16.

[xix] Ibid. 36-38.

[xx] Mitford dismisses the claim that modern American practices of embalming are rooted in early "Judeo-Christian beliefs," (Ibid. 140-144). Also, see Mitford's informative treatment of the funeral industry's rather thin defense of embalming along hygienic and therapeutic lines (54-69).

[xxi] Ibid. 43.

[xxii] Ibid. 44. For full and graphic description of the embalming process, see 43-49.

[xxiii] Ibid. 16. For an interesting discussion of the open-casket ceremony, a custom simply assumed in the U.S. but unknown in many other parts of the world, see 50, 63-66.

[xxiv] Ibid. 47, directly citing from J. Sheridan Mayer's Restorative Art.

[xxv] Ibid. 38. While Christians might initially warm to such explicitly religious nomenclature, Mitford suggests that the turn towards language of the "chapel" simply and conveniently circumvents the word "funeral." Highlighting the commercial benefits of this kind of "religious" terminology, she continues: "The chapel proper is a simulated place of worship. Because it has to be all things to all people, it is subject to a quick change by wheeling into place a 'devotional chapel set' appropriate to the religion being catered to at the moment—a Star of David, a cross, a statue of the Virgin, and so on" (38). Similarly, Long 2009: 91.

[xxvi] Mitford 2000: 17, 51-53.

[xxvii] Lathrop 2006: 126.

[xxviii] Among some church traditions, funerals have even been largely replaced by memorial services that celebrate the life of the dead with photographs and flowers, but without the body of the dead actually present (see Mitford 2000: 214; Long 2009: 83-84).

[xxix] Mitford 2000: 147-148.

[xxx] For more on the various stakeholders involved in the funeral industry, Ibid. 70-80.

[xxxi] Ibid. 51.

[xxxii] Long 2009: 90.