

Text: 2 Kings 13:20-21 (Jer 20:7-11, 2Cor 5:16-6:10, Matt 18:10-14) ✠ Installation of Rev. Chris Maronde

In the name of him in whom we are a new creation, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: I am both pleased and honored to be able to address you in the Lord on this day of celebration for your congregation. My history with Pastor Maronde and his family goes back a ways. Bethany, Mrs. Maronde, had the misfortune to be in the first class of students I catechized and confirmed when I was a newly ordained minister. She probably still has nightmares about it. Several years later, the couple asked me to officiate at their wedding. Then, a little over four years ago, I had the privilege of preaching at the service at which Pastor Maronde was ordained into the office of the holy ministry. Over the years it's been rewarding to see the Lord Jesus working in the lives of this fine Christian couple building them up in holy faith, uniting them in steadfast love, and preparing them to serve the people of God in their respective vocations. So yes, I'm glad to be part of this event for them; but also for all of you and the Church at large, because today we celebrate the fulfillment of the Lord's promise to provide faithful shepherds to serve, to care for, and to feed his people with the very Bread of Life from heaven.

With that in mind, the primary text I've chosen as the basis for this message is 2 Kings 13:20-21, where we read: *So Elisha died, and they buried him. Now bands of Moabites used to invade the land in the spring of the year. And as a man was being buried, behold, a marauding band was seen and the man was thrown into the grave of Elisha, and as soon as the man touched the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood on his feet.* The Word of the Lord.

Wow. Imagine that: a resurrection performed by a dead prophet. That's unique in the Old Testament. True, the spirit of Samuel comes back briefly from beyond the grave to prophesy God's judgment on King Saul; but only Elisha can be credited with a posthumous miracle. These days they're more common, it seems. As I understand it, you need several to your credit in order to be declared a saint in the Church of Rome; but I digress ...

Returning to the text, it's one of those passages that is so frustratingly brief that it leaves you asking a lot of questions. Who was this guy who died? How did he die? Did this ever happen again? Did anyone try? As much as we'd like them, we don't have the answers. However, if you'll allow me a little creative leeway, without violating the text I'd like to flesh out the account a bit and try to picture how it may have gone down.

We start with a man who's died. We don't know who he was; but it really doesn't matter. He was someone's son, husband, father, brother. He had family and friends. And all of them are deeply saddened by his death. The whole community joins in their sorrow. The body of the deceased has been lovingly washed and prepared for burial by his nearest kin. It's been anointed with fragrant oils and spices, and wrapped with clean strips of linen. They place it upon a wooden bier, which is lifted to the shoulders of four strong men. And the funeral procession begins. It winds through narrow streets, the mourners following the pallbearers, their heads down, weeping as they go. When they come to the city gate, the sad little parade stops. It's dangerous beyond the walls this time of year, especially for women and children. Moabite raiders roam the countryside, looking for unwary souls to capture and take back to their land to serve as slaves. So here the procession pauses to allow the mourners time to bid their final farewells.

The cemetery is outside the city some distance away. To minimize exposure to risk, from this point proceed only the four men carrying the corpse and maybe another fleet-footed youth to go before them to act as lookout, to warn them of potential threats while they focus

their attention on performing their last duty for their fallen companion. All of them want to get out there, do what must be done, and return to the safety of the city as quickly as possible.

But, as we heard, despite the precautions they may have taken, the worst happens. As they're closing on the burial ground, they catch sight of a mounted raiding party heading their way. There's no hope in simply dropping their cargo and trying to outrun the raiders back to the city. It's too far. They'd all be taken captive. Instead, since they haven't yet been sighted, they decide to hide themselves in one of the cave-like tombs. The one they enter happens to be the family tomb whose most recent occupant is Elisha the prophet.

The typical family tomb consisted of a narrow tunnel of an entryway, a low ceiling room or compartment with two or more berths carved out of the walls for resting bodies of the newly dead, and then a back chamber in which the bones of those who had died earlier were neatly stacked or placed in stone boxes called ossuaries. In this way the tombs were "reusable". You'd lay the newly dead in there and then come back after an appropriate interval, when decay had done its work and there was nothing left but bones, and clear the spot for the next member of the family who died. It was their space saving tradition; but I'm glad our burial customs are different.

Anyway, try to picture the scene in the tomb after all have clambered in there. It's cramped. The place wasn't made to hold four or five guys and a body too. It's dark. The last guy in rolled the stone back over the entry to avoid detection. And there is the permeating smell of death. Not new death, not the sharp stench of putrefying flesh; no, this is the musty odor of old decay. The body of Elisha is almost completely decomposed. Only his bones remain. Now, normally you'd never lay a body atop another in a tomb like this; but these were unusual circumstances. In their urgency and crowded confusion in the dark, they end up laying their charge right on top of the bones of the prophet. And as soon as the two come into contact, the body of the dead man returns to life.

It makes me wonder who started to scream first: the guy who noticed the corpse they'd been carrying was wriggling around and trying to sit up, or the guy who awoke to find himself lying tied up in a dark tomb thinking he'd been buried alive. Whatever yelling took place would have been short lived as the others would have shushed the offenders into silence fearing that the noise would alert their would-be captors.

Sometime later, after they're sure the coast is clear, the men return to the city. Picture a few snapshots if you will: the watchman on the wall who's wondering who's that other guy walking back with the burial detail. And his jaw dropping when they're close enough that he's able to figure it out. The wonder of the family at having their loved one returned to them, their sorrow so quickly turned to joy, their weeping to laughter. And the backslapping and celebratory ... um, "wine tasting" that goes on long into the night as the four pallbearers each tell and retell their version of the story to eager folks who just can't hear it enough. These four are instant heroes, the toast of the town. And I suspect that the next day anyone with prior funeral arrangements changed them. "When I die, I want those four guys to carry me out."

It's fascinating account. But maybe you're wondering what in the world it has to do with why we're here today. The answer, in a word, is everything. It comes into clear focus when we understand that the prophet Elisha in many ways foreshadowed the life and ministry of Jesus. This is evident first by his name which means "My God Saves" or "My God is Salvation". That's very close to the name Jesus which means "The Lord saves". Then there's the fact that Elisha, like Jesus, had a prophet Elijah who went before him to prepare his way. And then there are

the miracles. On a smaller scale, Elisha performed many of the same miracles that Jesus would later do: multiplying loaves of bread, healing a leper, giving sight to the blind, and even raising a boy from the dead. In these and other ways, Elisha is very much an Old Testament foreshadow of the Savior to come.

And with that in mind, it's easy to see that what the four pallbearers do in this story is very much a prophetic foreshadow of the office of the holy ministry. They bring a dead man into contact with a dead Christ figure. And what is a pastor's job except to bring persons dead in their sins into direct contact with the death of Jesus? That's what gives life. That's what raises people up again. In fact, if you think about it, what these four guys did is a great portrait of Baptism. They buried a man with Christ – or a Christ figure, anyway. And that's what Baptism is: it's death and burial with Jesus. That's what makes alive.

This is what a pastor's ministry of reconciliation is all about: bringing dead sinners to the death of Jesus in Baptism, in Confession and Absolution, in preaching and teaching, and in the Lord's Supper in which the pastor presses to your lips the body of Jesus given for you, the blood of Jesus shed for you. His whole task is to connect you, dead in your sins, to the death of Jesus for your sin. That's what gives you new life now. And that's what will raise you up on the Last Day. What you need, what the Church always needs, are pastors who will do nothing but cast your dead body into the grave with Jesus for in that is your life in time and eternity.

However, it needs to be said that like all Old Testament types and foreshadows, this portrait is incomplete. In the story, Elisha, the Christ figure, remains dead and decayed. The Lord Jesus did not decay. And after his brief rest in the tomb he rose again and is very much alive. While the pastor's task is to touch those to whom he ministers with death of Jesus for in that is the forgiveness of sin, it's also his task to proclaim to them the power of Christ's resurrection so that justified, cleansed of sin, and filled with the Holy Spirit they may walk with the risen Lord in newness of life. Yes, we preach Christ crucified first, foremost, and always. But we also proclaim his resurrection and life.

And yet another way the story presents an incomplete picture of the holy ministry is that it leaves out the vital first step. In the text, we're not told how the man died, only that he did. And after that, the obvious place to take him was to the place of burial. What else are you going to do with a corpse? Ah, but with the pastoral ministry it's not that easy. You see, the pastor's first task is to preach to sinners that they are dead. He must proclaim the Law of God in all its strength and fury so that by it the Holy Spirit may crush hard hearts, terrify consciences, and bring sinners to the death of repentance. The pastor must first quite literally preach his hearers to death. (Mind you, my brothers in ministry, I didn't say bore them to death. It's not the same thing.) But only when sinners have died by the Law can they be cast upon the death of Jesus that gives them life.

And therein lies the rub: sinners, being sinners whose hearts are in rebellion against the Lord, don't like to admit that they're dead. Instead they deny their sins and try to hide them. They refuse to admit that their sins are offenses in the eyes of God. They attempt to justify themselves by pointing out all the good things they've done. There are any number of other dodges used to avoid the truth, but they all amount to the same thing: "I'm not dead, and how dare you accuse me of it!" Oddly enough, the toughest nuts to crack are usually those who are the most outwardly religious. Certainly that's what Jeremiah discovered as he preached his message of repentance to the Jerusalem of his day – the Jerusalem that paid lip service to the Lord while engaging in all kinds of pagan practice and idolatry. St. Paul discovered it too. His fiercest opponents outside the Christian faith were those who most scrupulously adhered to the

Laws of Moses. And his biggest detractors within the Church were those who insisted upon adding their own self-justifying deeds to the perfect work of Jesus already finished on the cross.

Of course, we all possess this sinful nature within us. And to protect itself against God's Word that puts to death, the sinful nature goes on the attack against anyone who proclaims it. Thus Jeremiah complains bitterly of being mocked and denounced by those who were plotting against him and seeking his fall. Likewise Paul speaks of his afflictions, hardships, and beatings at the hands of those who resisted God's call to repent and to be reconciled in Christ. The pastor's first task of preaching his hearers to death is one that makes him a lightning rod for criticism, personal attack, slander, and abuse. So the temptation he has, like Jeremiah, is to put his hand over his mouth and refuse to speak what God commands. That may make him popular and well liked. It's worked for lots of preachers. But it won't bring dead sinners to life. No, to do what God's Word burning in his bones like fire demands, he must be willing to be despised and suffer loss.

Which makes us ask, "Who can do this? Who is equal to the task?" The answer is no man. No self-serving sinner can take this on. It goes against our very nature. Which is why the pastor himself must confess his fear, his doubt, his weakness, his desire to be praised and win accolades, his pursuit of earthly glory, all these sins and more. To perform the first task of preaching sinners to death, the pastor must first let God's Law put him to death. Only then, dying to self can he be cast upon the death of Jesus for sin. Only then can he be raised with Christ confident that the Lord is with him like a dread warrior, and that the Word of Truth and Power the Lord speaks through his mouth will do the work of putting sinners to death and bringing to life the righteous children of God through faith in Christ Jesus.

That is the two-fold task of the holy ministry. And that is what we celebrate today. The harvest is plentiful, the laborers are few. We pray, therefore, that God in his mercy will continue to provide such faithful pastors to his Church: pastors who, relying on the Lord, will boldly preach his Word in all of its Truth and Purity; pastors who will ever cast dead sinners on the death of Jesus for the forgiveness of sin; pastors to whom the people of God will point and say, "When I die, when the Law of God kills me, I want that guy to carry me out." In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***