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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
The Transfiguration of Our Lord
Saturday, February 26th, 2022
Sunday, February 27th, 2022

Sermon: What Do You Want on Your Tombstone?

Texts: Deuteronomy 34

Focus: Our ultimate appraisal comes from God, not people.

Function: That they would live in the grace of God.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: “That I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom...” (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles’ Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. What will they say about you after you die? How will your obituary read? For what will you be remembered? What will they put on your tombstone?

- “He played a great golf game”?
- “He went on 20 cruises”?
- “She ran a marathon.”
- “He died a millionaire?”
- “She was a beloved wife and mother” (or husband and father)?
- “He’d give you the shirt off his back?”
- “She baked the best apple pie”?
- “He planted a church?”
- “She served on every church committee she could”?
- “He funded God’s mission?”
- “She was a friend of God”?

Some of those are pretty good. Some others, not so much.

In the 1990’s, there was a series of TV commercials for a brand of frozen pizza called TOMBSTONE. The TV spots would show a band of outlaws preparing to hang the local sheriff or U.S. Marshall. After asking the lawman for his final last words, the bandit would always say, “And what do you want on your tombstone?” “Pepperoni and cheese,” came the quick reply right before a flash to the TOMBSTONE logo and a slice of piping hot pizza. (*Aside: There*

were other variations with firing squads and gangsters with concrete shoes. Those commercials were great! If you're curious, you can find the reruns on YouTube).

“What do you want on your tombstone?” was a funny ad campaign, but there was certainly nothing funny about Moses' obituary in today's Old Testament lesson from Deuteronomy 34. Yahweh's assessment of Moses's life, no doubt penned by his successor, Joshua, was quite praiseworthy:

“Moses was 120 years old when he died. His eye was undimmed, and his vigor unabated.... And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, none like him for all the signs and the wonders that the LORD sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, and for all the mighty power and all the deeds of terror that Moses did in the sight of Israel” (Deut. 34:7, 10-12, ESV).¹

Since Moses died, no other prophet has arisen like Moses—until Jesus showed up on the scene (cf. Deut. 18:15). “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

During his lifetime, Moses was regarded as the meekest man on earth (cf. Num. 12:3). Perhaps you don't picture Moses as a humble man. After all, he was a great leader and the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. God did many mighty signs and wonders by Moses hand, not least of which were rescuing the Israelites from slavery and receiving the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. And yes, Moses had a bit of a temper. In fact, his anger got him into trouble so that Yahweh did not allow him to enter the Promised Land (Deut. 34:4; cf. Num. 20:2-13).

After the Exodus, during Israel's 40 years wandering in the Sinai wilderness, the people of God repeatedly grumbled and complained about their condition: food, water, etc., etc., etc. After 40 years of listening to them gripe, Moses finally had had it. In Numbers 20 they

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

complained once again that they were dying of thirst. God told Moses to speak to a rock so that it would pour forth water for the people to drink.

But instead Moses lashed out in anger: “Hear now, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out from this rock?” (Num. 20:10). Then he struck the rock hard with his staff—not once, but *twice*! Moses’s anger got the better of him. He insulted God’s people (even though they deserved it). He hit the rock instead of speaking to it, as God had commanded. And notice how Moses took credit for God’s work: “Shall *we* bring water for you out from this rock?” Not “shall *God* give you water,” but “shall *we* bring water for you.”

Moses’s actions were an affront to God’s holiness. So Yahweh punished Moses and Aaron, swearing to them that “you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them” (Num. 20:12). God would bring Moses to the very *borders* of the Promised Land, but he would not let him enter. And that’s where Moses died in Deuteronomy 34: on the top of Mount Nebo in the land of Moab (modern-day Jordan), peering into the Promised Land where he could not set foot. Then Moses died, and God buried him in an unknown location (no doubt, to keep Moses’s gravesite from becoming a shrine for the people of Israel).

Moses had a major problem with anger management. In his youth, it drove him to murder and turned him into an outlaw. In his golden years, it cost him admission to the land of Canaan. Yet God’s final assessment of Moses’s life was not to excoriate him for his sins, but to pass over them—and to praise him for the good works God permitted him to do. He even graciously gave Moses a glimpse of the Promised Land in a divine vision that went far beyond what the naked eye could behold ordinarily. Moses saw all the territory of Canaan that would belong to the children of Israel. And although he wasn’t permitted to enter while alive, today’s Gospel reading demonstrates a surprising reality: when Moses appeared with Elijah on the

Mount of Transfiguration to meet with Jesus, that miraculous event took place in Israelite territory. In other words, while not allowed in life, in his death, Moses finally set foot in the Promised Land.

When I consider my own life, I am embarrassed and ashamed by many of my words and deeds: my selfishness, pride, and lust. Old conversations play on repeat on the record player in my head. My hurtful actions against others and my shameful private deeds still haunt my memory, playing on a video repeat loop. I resonate with the prayer of David in Psalm 25: “Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O LORD!” (Ps. 25:7). And in Psalm 130: “If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared” (Ps. 130:3-4, NIV).²

With the Lord there is forgiveness. He doesn't keep a record of wrongs. Because Jesus died on the cross for your sins and rose again, your faults and failures are not what you will be remembered for. “He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.... As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us” (Ps. 103:10, 12). Instead, you will be commended for your faith in Christ, and the good works God permitted you to do. You don't have to earn your salvation by good deeds—or worry about losing your salvation because of your misdeeds. All is forgiven and accomplished by Christ.

There are some rather complicated people who did some very dastardly deeds who are remembered very differently by God than by the world. The patriarch Abraham was a slaveowner and a bit of a con man (although not quite so big of a con as his grandson Jacob!).

² All Scriptures marked NIV are from THE HOLY BIBLE: NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION, 1984. I do not use the questionable 2011 update.

Yet the Bible says Abraham “was called a friend of God” (Jas. 2:23). King David was called a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22), despite being a murderer, adulterer, and a terrible father. Yet the Bible records of David that “after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, [he] fell asleep and was laid with his fathers...” (Acts 13:36). Wouldn’t that be an amazing epitaph for your tombstone?! SALLY SERVED HER PURPOSE IN HER GENERATION. BOB FULFILLED GOD’S WILL. PASTOR CHRIS SERVED HIS PURPOSE. Nothing more, nothing less.

So what do you want on *your* tombstone?

After I die, it really doesn’t matter what other people say about me. Ultimately, I serve an audience of One: God alone. “For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ” (Gal. 1:10). “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain...” (1 Cor. 15:10a). I am confident that Jesus will speak to me the same words the King told the first two servants in the Parable of the Talents: “Well done, good and faithful servant.... Enter into the joy of your master” (Matt. 25:21). This is the welcome every believer in Jesus will hear on Judgment Day.

I want to end with the word of a newer hymn that is also a prayer. More than 10 years ago, Steven Fry wrote a beautiful Christian song “Let It Be Said of Us.” This song is a prayer, and its lyrics convey what I hope people will say about us here at Epiphany after we are gone someday:

*Let it be said of us
That the Lord was our passion
That with gladness we bore
Every cross we were given
That we fought the good fight*

*That we finished our course
Knowing within us the power of the risen Lord*

*Let the cross be our glory
And the Lord be our song
By mercy made holy
By the Spirit made strong
Let the cross be our glory
And the Lord be our song
'Till the likeness of Jesus
Be through us made known
Let the cross be our glory
And the Lord be our song*

*Let it be said of us
We were marked by forgiveness
We were known by our love
And delighted in meekness
We were ruled by his peace
Heeding unity's call
Joined as one body
That Christ would be seen by all*

*Let the cross be our glory
And the Lord be our song
By mercy made holy
By the Spirit made strong
Let the cross be our glory
And the Lord be our song
'Till the likeness of Jesus
Be through us made known
Let the cross be our glory
And the Lord be our song*

Amen.

So what do I want on *my* tombstone? Here's the epitaph I hope they put on mine: HE WAS A CHILD OF GOD. That has a nice ring to it, don't you think? In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.