

Devotion #16: Tuesday after the 12th Sunday after Trinity: "Actus Felix"

2 Kings 20:1-7 (ESV): 1 In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came to him and said to him, "Thus says the Lord, 'Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover.'" 2 Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, saying, 3 "Now, O Lord, please remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight." And Hezekiah wept bitterly. 4 And before Isaiah had gone out of the middle court, the word of the Lord came to him: 5 "Turn back, and say to Hezekiah the leader of my people, Thus says the Lord, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Behold, I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the Lord, 6 and I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and I will defend this city for my own sake and for my servant David's sake." 7 And Isaiah said, "Bring a cake of figs. And let them take and lay it on the boil, that he may recover."

In Nomine Iesu. Amen.

From the English priest and poet John Donne come the lines made famous by Ernest Hemingway: "...never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." Donne's point is that we are all part of something bigger than ourselves, that we are interrelated, and that one man's death is a newsflash to every man: He died; so must you. Hence the need for what was known in the Middle Ages as the "ars moriendi" – the art of dying. The idea that some die well, and others, not so much; that there is a way of dying well, and that this way is open to those who train themselves in it.

Fittingly, it is with a death-knell, with a tolling death-bell that the great Ton Koopman begins his rendition of J.S. Bach's masterpiece, "Actus tragicus," a funeral composition. "God's time is the best time!" The music of life comes forth, a thickly interwoven musical matrix reflecting the web of life, the choir singing the poetic proverb cited by St. Paul in Acts: In him we live and move and have our being; the music pulses, in God we live and move and have our being – for as long as he pleases, cautions Bach – and then, suddenly, irreversibly, the whole tone of the music changes, in an instant, as the words change too: In him we die at the appointed time, when it pleases him. Death interrupts, abruptly alters the music of life, changes everything, draws a line through feelings, emotions, hopes and dreams, convictions, worldviews. The alto sings in a warning tone the words from Ps. 90: Lord! Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. As you encounter

death, you become aware of your own mortality, memento mori, the shock of mortality in the midst of life; we must indeed learn to die.

Strident now, insistent follow the words from our text, Isaiah's words to Hezekiah: Set your house in order. No, not "tidy up your act" – this is: "Sort out your successor, dictate your last will and testament, set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover. And now the fugue, again and again, inescapably, the repetition: "This is the old covenant: Man, you must die, you must die, you must die!" These words are brought home too to the king of Judah, Hezekiah, as he lies on his bed – his deathbed. Time for the *ars moriendi*, my friend. Couldn't come at a worse time, this news; the Assyrians, the great enemy of the people of God, are approaching with their war machine, flattening everything in their path. Already, the northern kingdom is no more, ten tribes taken out by the king of Assyria and his military might; all that is left of God's people is the remnant in the south, the little glimmer, the fitfully flickering light that is Judah, threatening to go out. And as the ground trembles under the thudding approach of the Assyrian army, Hezekiah contracts an abscess, an infection that signs his death certificate.

Why, we ask? Why Hezekiah? He doesn't deserve it, we cry. "He is a good man, Lord! A man of faith, God! He is not like his wicked father Ahaz, who refused to trust in you. Hezekiah is a king after your own heart, Lord, an upright, godly, believing, repentant, righteous man who trusts in you, Lord, the last hope of the beleaguered people of God. What bitter irony! What a mockery of justice! You take the leader from his people just when they need him most!" But is that not the irony of death itself? Death spares no man, neither wicked nor righteous, good nor bad, serf nor royal; and so Isaiah comes to toll the bell, to sound the death-knell for the king of Judah.

These same thoughts course through the feverish mind of Hezekiah himself. He lies outwardly passive on his bed, but his soul and spirit are threshing about, wrestling with God himself, like Jacob at the Jabbok. You see, in Israel, dying young was seen as a blight, a curse. When the Lord repeated His covenant to His people, He Himself promised: You shall walk in all the way that the LORD your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you shall possess (Deut 5:33). And here is the king, dying young, it is not going well with him. Hezekiah turns to the wall, away from flesh and blood; he turns to confront God. In his anguish and wrestling, he holds out God's promise, rub it in his ears: Now, O Lord, please remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight. It is not that Hezekiah is self-righteous; we know this, for he

acknowledges his sin (Isa 38:17). Hezekiah speaks here in faith; he weeps at the tolling of the bell, for he is saddened that he must die without an heir, die the ignominious death of the unrighteous in the very face of his approaching enemies.

But then the unfathomable happens. The actus tragicus starts playing backward. Isaiah hasn't even left the palace, when the Lord sends him back. That quickly. Hezekiah's prayer is heard. Just like that. The Lord will restore the king; the Lord will restore the people of Judah; the Lord will spare the city. Just like that. Yes, the Lord will do that, He says; why? For my own sake and for my servant David's sake. And Hezekiah is healed.

What do we learn from this? Here we must exercise great caution. We should not hear this story as recipe theology; we may not degrade this into yet another "prayer of Jabez" fiasco, as if to say: "Follow these steps and you find the heart of God," or, even worse, "here's how to get the Lord to change His mind and do your will." No, it is the Lord who heals here, for His sake, and for the sake of His faithfulness to David and David's offspring, yes, to His own promise to David. Healing is not a show, not a trick, not a reward. It is not a matter of bartering or haggling or negotiating a deal with God, where X prayer will result in Y healing. It is not a matter of eating snakes and becoming immune. When the Lord gives healing, it is simply gift, grace, goodness. The Lord has promised healing; many are the times when you yourself have already received this healing, as have the Lord's people, quietly, without any mess or fuss or dog-and-pony show. Most pastors see this happen in their ministry at some point; it is usually quiet, goes under the radar. This is not about getting God to do anything. This is about who God is. It is the assurance that He is faithful and will keep His Word; sometimes sooner, sometimes later, always without fail. From this learn to pray boldly, to pray in faith, pray for healing for the sick, pray for a righting of wrongs, pray for the Lord's will to be done in this country among us also, for godly leaders to be raised up to lead in righteousness – and to cling to the Lord in faith. Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me (Ps. 50:15). So it is. This is simply God being true to His Word, to His promises, and true to Himself.

Yes, this is about who the Lord is. The heart of God is not in recipe theology. It is in Christ that you see the heart of God. This is the Lord who has no pleasure in the death of the dead ones, but calls them to life. This is the Lord who shuts his ears to the Lama Sabachthani of His own Son in order to give life to Hezekiah and to you. Yes, prayer is wrestling with God, but not with God as your enemy. No, through Christ, God is your ally, your redeemer, your deliverer. He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Rom 8:32) So pray, pray in confidence. Bach too

reflects this conviction. In the *actus tragicus*, as the choir hammers away: "Man, you must die, you must die, you must die," comes the confident song of faith in the soprano: "Yes, come! Yes, come, Lord Jesus, come!" And this is the song of faith, the song of life, this is the confidence that carries the day and finally wins out. Whether you live or die, you are the Lord's.

And so also John Donne concludes that even though we must learn the art of dying, we Christians are not only touched by the death of others, but also their life, and especially the life of Christ. Donne: "The Church is Catholike, universall, so are all her Actions; All that she does, belongs to all. When she baptizes a child, that action concerns mee, for that child is thereby connected to that Head which is my Head too, and engrafted into that body, whereof I am a member ... All mankinde is of one Author, and is one volume; when one Man dies, one Chapter is not torn out of the booke, but translated into a better language." Christ, the life of all the living, Christ, the death of death, our foe... Christ lives, and so will you. And so you too rejoice as the Lord concludes and converts your *actus tragicus* into a doxology: "All honor, praise, and majesty To Father Son and Spirit be, Our God forever glorious, In whose rich grace We run our race Till we depart victorious." Amen.

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