

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
March 27, 2011
Lenten Hymn Series**

Hebrews 9:27,28

“Upon the Cross Extended”
Hymn 113

Hymns: 98 – 714 – 113

All Scripture quotations from the NIV

Hebrews 9:27,28 ***Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.***

A once in a lifetime experience. I'm sure you've heard someone attach that description to an event they've told you about. Most likely, it is a phrase that you've used to describe various events as well. This time of year always makes me think of a once in a lifetime event for me. It was two years ago, the beginning of April. I was vicaring in Ottawa, Ontario. A classmate offered me what might be one of the toughest tickets to get in all of sports. He had four tickets to Opening Day at Fenway Park in Boston, legendary home of the Red Sox. In order to get these tickets, his name had literally been drawn out of hundreds of thousands of people. I got to see the famed Green Monster up close and personal. But the truth about that once in a lifetime event and many others is that they aren't truly once in a lifetime. If I really wanted to, and if I really wanted to empty my bank account, I could make that experience happen again. And that is true of many experiences to which people attach the label "once in a lifetime."

But there is an event in life for every single person that is truly once in a lifetime. Our Lenten hymn to focus on today is 113 *Upon the Cross Extended*. The text on which that hymn is based tells us very clearly what that event is. Hebrews 9:27 says, "**Man is destined to die once.**" Every single person who is born

into this world will also die. And we know exactly why it will happen. Every single one of us is born in sin and each of us spends our life living in sin. And the Bible clearly says in multiple places but most succinctly in Romans 6 that the wages of sin is death. And while we know that death will certainly come to each of us, we don't know when it will come. That reality has hit Holy Trinity hard in the last two weeks; the sudden passing of a young 1st grade girl; the tragic death of a serviceman who was preparing to come home to WA. When death becomes personal, it serves as a very stern reminder to never take a single minute of our time of grace for granted.

The reality of death was something that our hymn writer knew as well. These words were again penned by Pastor Paul Gerhardt, who you might remember is the Father of Lutheran hymnody. He wrote this hymn at the end of the 30 Year's War. The war involved much of Europe, but was fought primarily in the territory of Germany, Gerhardt's homeland. It is said that half of Germany's male population died during the 30 years of that war. What a trying time that must have been. It's hard to imagine any German family not having felt the very personal side of death during that time. For all those people, death became all too familiar.

And when death comes, another one time event occurs. That event is eternal judgment. The verse from Hebrews says plainly what many try to deny or not think about. "**Man is destined to die once, and then face judgment.**" And that second part of death is what causes the fear of death for many. For every person there is a natural knowledge that at some time, they are going to have to answer to a higher power. That is a very daunting prospect for people inflicted with the guilt of sin. Standing before a God who says, "**Be perfect as I am perfect**" and knowing that you aren't is terrifying. You can think right now that your good outweighs your bad or you've tried really hard or you are better than the next person, but when you are in front of God, the reality will be that you are not perfect. I am not perfect. No one is perfect. And that means that the verdict, based on our respective bodies of work, should be a thumbs down to eternal punishment in hell. That is mankind's once in a lifetime event. Death and then judgment.

And when Christ came to earth as true man, it ensured that he would also have a once in a lifetime event. Our text tells us that just as every person is

destined to die, so also Christ would die. As true man, it was something that needed to happen. It is the reality that we will see clearly in 3 ½ weeks on Good Friday. And as we hear those details, it is important to remember that there was nothing easy about Jesus' death just because he was the Son of God.

Hymn 113 describes that death in great detail in the first four verses. The first image we are given is of a suffocating Jesus. We again hear about the shame and blows of fists, being bound and scourged, wearing thorns and being mocked. No detail was spared in Gerhardt's words. Considering this is a Lenten hymn, that shouldn't surprise us. But remember when this hymn was written – at the end of 30 years of war, when people knew pain and suffering and the ugliness of death very well. And yet, Gerhardt thought it would be good for his people to think about death some more. Had he lost it? Was he intent on destroying his members' morale? Of course not! Instead, with death all around them, he wanted them to see how different Christ's death was from the many deaths that had occurred during this war.

In addition to the pain and suffering that made Christ's death like many deaths, the words of this hymn also show how it was very different. Verse 2 especially says: "How God at our transgression, to anger gives expression, how loud his thunders roll, how fearfully he smites him, how sorely he requites him." The thing that made Christ's death so very different was not the physical pain and agony. As tough as it was, similar pain has been felt by some. The full wrath and abandonment by God is what made this death truly terrible and very different, but it was for a purpose.

Just as man is destined to die once and then face judgment, there would be a verdict when Jesus died as well. And just as Christ's death was different from every person, the verdict would also be different. As God looked at Jesus' body of work, as he looked at his earthly life, he saw perfection. For the first and only time, God could look on a human life and see no spot on the record. Though he faced every temptation, the Son of God was perfect. God could give this life a thumbs up.

And that meant his death was innocent. And b/c it was innocent, it could be a sacrifice. The blood that God required from each and every person b/c of sin was satisfied when, in its place the perfect life of Christ

was sacrificed on the cross. This was not a once in a lifetime event, it was a once for all time event – a fully sufficient act that could only be accomplished by God himself. He atoned for sin, he made up for it, he paid the price. Hebrews 10:10 says, "We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." Hebrews 10:18 says, "Where these (sins) have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin." Those words tell us very clearly that Christ's saving death was a one-time event done for all people. Christ doesn't have to be sacrificed again. Mankind doesn't need to add anything to it. The proclamation, "It is finished!" truly says it all. And that is why, amidst all the death a 30 year war brought, Gerhardt chose to continue to focus on death. As his people struggled with it all, he needed to remind them that it could be much worse. The momentary pain and sadness that comes with death could also be lacking hope. Added to the earthly pain could be this wrath of God, the thunder of his justness, the reality of eternal punishment in hell. Those are the real results of the judgment that is sure to accompany each sinner's death.

But it is not for those who trust in Christ. Through his one-time sacrifice, he assured that death would be nothing more than the gateway into the eternal glories of heaven. And that is why Gerhardt's hymn was just what people who have been reminded of death need to hear. Our God knows the pain of death. He also knows the feeling of being completely cast out by God. And while he can't take away death, he can take away all of its power and fear. He has put death and the judgment that has come into a very different light. The certainty of death and judgment is also accompanied by the certainty of Jesus' work and its results. As much as I know that each one of you will die, I can be even more sure that each of you that believes in Jesus will have eternal life and salvation.

And while looking at Christ's death will change how we look at our own deaths, it will also change every day of our lives up to that event as well. Knowing that Christ has taken away the most fearful part of death can fill us with confidence as that day approaches. As it changes our perspective, it fills us with joy in knowing what lies ahead. It fills us with thanks that we see only a part of the destruction of death. Gerhardt describes this life of thankful love in verse 5 as he says, "Your cords of love, my Savior bind me to you forever; I am no longer mine. To you I gladly tender all that my life can render and all I have to you resign."

Filled with confidence, we also seek to share that confidence with as many others as possible. We have the one thing which can change the perception of death. We have the one thing that can change the reality of death. It takes away the devil's most powerful tool. Some people spend their entire lives worrying about how the end might come. They fret over what might happen after that. We know! This is not a secret to hold onto. It is a message that every person needs to hear. It can change this once in a lifetime event from something dreadful into something joyful. That is an amazing gift. Share it with others! As we sing Gerhardt's words, focus on the truth that Jesus changed forever what lies in our future. Amen.