

2021-02-21 Dead or Alive

Dead or Alive

February 21, 2021

Pastor Scott Austin

artisanchurch.com

[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

1 Peter 3:18-22

Thank you, Ken, and hello once again to everybody. If you didn't hear me at the beginning of the service or hear Pastor Jessie tell you a minute ago, we are operating our service from the sanctuary this week. Typically we've been in our offices and this week we're kind of practicing what it looks like to try to do our service on Zoom from the Artisan sanctuary. And we have nothing to report just yet about when it might be that you can join us in this room, but I hope that will be soon.

So I wanted to take a minute and say thank you to a few people. First of all, thanks to Matthew Nikoloff who preached a sermon in my absence last week while my family and I were on vacation. I'm so grateful to him for giving his time and talents in that way. And then also, thanks to the people of Artisan who made our Ash Wednesday experience happen. I was on vacation that night as well, and Jean and Del and some others put together a whole Ash Wednesday liturgy on Zoom, which I know many of you experienced and was really wonderful. So, I'm so grateful to the people in our community who are gifted and who share their time and resources to help our church keep going even through this strange time, and when I'm away on vacation during this strange time.

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent, and Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, but this is the first Sunday in the season. And many of you probably know that Lent is typically a season where the church kind of pauses to reflect and repent and prepare ourselves for Easter and the Resurrection. It's important, and I've always stressed this for Artisan's whole existence, that we don't rush ahead to Easter. We actually take time to dwell in the ashes, if you will, of the season of Lent. But this year, it seems like it's been Lent for a whole year. We were in the season of Lent last March when we stopped meeting in person. And with the exception of a few outdoor

2021-02-21 Dead or Alive

services over the summer, we have not gathered again for public worship in person. Again, we're always grateful for the many ways that we're able to stay connected during this time, but the point is it seems, in some ways, like Lent never ended this year. And I was already thinking along those lines. I had planned out this Lenten series to reflect that when I came upon this poem that I want to read to you. It was written by a pastor named Benjamin Perry, pastor of Middle Collegiate Church in Manhattan. He posted it to Twitter, and I want to show it to you on screen and read it to you now because I think it's so, so powerful for the season that we're in: "I want to mark my forehead but last year's ashes won't rub off. The sun stayed set on Easter. A sign on the rock at the tomb: 'Back in 15 minutes' but it's been a year. Still no young man dressed in white, and I'm so tired of wilderness."

So, yeah. The Lent that never ends. Kind of what we're experiencing right now. And so, Colleen has put into the chat, "Yep I feel that." I wonder how others of you might respond to that poem. You can type, you know, just one or two or three words or a yes with five S's [laughs] which I think is very fitting. [Reading responses aloud] "Yes, this wilderness has been so dark." "= Never Ending Story." Avila says, "Sounds about right." This poem is resonating with many of you as it resonated with me. And by the way, you can always be answering these questions in Facebook on the chat, and I do always go and check them during the week sometime. Obviously I can't respond to them right now, but I want you to be able to participate in that way as well.

So this year, our Lenten theme is "Life After Suffering," and I'll say more about how I want us to think about the observation of Lent a little bit later. The readings for the first Sunday in Lent, which are very interesting to me, include the same story from the Gospels as the readings for the first Sunday in Epiphany. And that's the story of Jesus' baptism. Now you may remember this from all the way back on January 10 when I talked about the voice of God coming from the heavens after Jesus' baptism, saying, "You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased." But as is often the case in the Gospels, there are several tellings of this story and this one that's given to us on this first Sunday in Lent is a little different than the one that was given to us on the first Sunday of Epiphany.

And so I want to read to you the actual Gospel reading for today, which is from Mark chapter one, verses 9-15. This is the story of Jesus' baptism — one of the other versions of it. It says, "In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven; 'You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased.' And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness 40 days, tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild beasts, and the

2021-02-21 Dead or Alive

angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news.’”

One thing that I didn't talk about back on the first Sunday of Epiphany is how much of a spiritual high this must have been for Jesus at the moment of his baptism. He must have felt so electrified at the close presence of the Father after 30 years of life on earth. And I wonder — you don't have to tell me about this because it would probably involve more typing than you can do in a quick Zoom message — but I wonder if you've had an experience in your life, spiritually that has left you feeling electrified. It's left you feeling acutely aware of the presence of God in your life. My belief is that God's presence is always with us, and our capacity to notice it is what ebbs and flows and comes and goes. And when you have an experience of that where you become acutely aware of the presence of God in your life, you can ride those experiences like a surfer riding a wave, and they sometimes will carry you for a good long while. They can carry you through doubt and pain and loss because you know, you're acutely aware from a recent reminder, that God is close to you despite the waves the world that may be swirling around you.

But usually, those experiences of high spirituality tend to fade and trail off, sometimes slowly, sometimes more quickly. And for Jesus, the high experience that he had of the baptism, coming up out of the water and seeing the Spirit descend like a dove and the voice of God audibly speaking, led him immediately — Now, Mark as a gospel writer uses the word “immediately” all the time, but *immediately* — straight out into the wilderness for 40 days. And 40 days in the Bible sometimes is literally 40 days and sometimes it's just, like, a real long time, right? It's like, “Man, I haven't had a good pizza in a year!” That kind of thing. But who knows how long it's actually been. Forty days of fasting and of grueling temptation, and this is described in much more detail in other Gospel accounts. I encourage you to go and take a look at those if you're curious.

But I want to show you and read to you this quotation from one of the Church Fathers, St. John Chrysostom, The Golden Mouthed Preacher. It says, “You see how the Spirit led him? Not into a city or a public arena but into a wilderness. In this desolate place, the spirit extended the devil an occasion to test him not only by hunger, but also by loneliness. For it is there, most especially, that the devil assails us, when he sees us left alone and by ourselves.” Now, I don't know and I don't necessarily care what your particular views might be about an embodied presence of evil in the world of a personified Satan. For what it's worth, in the Scriptures it's usually “the Satan,” which gives us a little clue about that. But it doesn't really matter to me

2021-02-21 Dead or Alive

how you receive those particular parts of it. The point is that the trial and the temptation was made worse not only by Jesus' hunger, but by his loneliness. You and I, we know a thing or two about grueling wilderness experiences at this point, don't we? The whole world does. And so I wonder, and you can type this into the Zoom chat of your mind, have you found that this season in the wilderness has left you susceptible to testing, to temptation? It has led you into trials? If not by literal hunger, then by loneliness, fatigue, or anger?

I was talking with someone about this just last week, how for us as a church last year, right before we went into lockdown, we were working through a series and a movement as a church called The Deconstruction Project which was just getting underway. If you were here with us at that time, you might remember it might have felt this way — I certainly felt like this was becoming very quickly a very meaningful spiritual experience that we were getting to have together. And it felt like things were beginning to shake loose for people in a new way. Maybe it wasn't a spiritual high mountaintop/baptism-voice-from-God type of experience, but it was so powerful and positive and yet, it led us directly into the wilderness. Immediately we were sent out into the pandemic, into quarantine. And a year now of isolation and sadness and death. And not just death, but deadness.

Some of you, but not all of you, have experienced an actual death as a result of COVID. All of us have experienced deadness. And so, I have no doubt that you are feeling that even now, day after day, every day. Maybe you're left feeling that there's no hope. But this is exactly why I believe the Christian story has so much to offer us and so much to offer the world right now, because the Christian story is one of life springing up out of death every time.

Before I started talking, you heard the Epistle reading from the Letter First Peter chapter three. And the Epistles, the letters that we find in the New Testament, are where the church is kind of beginning to feel out an interpretation and an application of the teachings of Jesus and of the Gospels. And there's that verse in First Peter, it's verse 18 of chapter three, that says of Jesus, "He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit." And then it actually goes on to say, "Also, He went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison." [Laughs] Boy do I wish that I could make the sermon about that. It would be very interesting to me, maybe not anybody else, but the tradition in the church is called "the harrowing of hell." And there's great artwork around this, by the way, if you get bored with what I'm saying. You can just go over to another window and search for it, but the idea is that Jesus descended in his spirit into hell and found all of the souls of the damned and proclaimed the gospel to them and led them out of captivity. Which is a pretty wild idea to imagine and I love thinking about it.

2021-02-21 Dead or Alive

Once again, it doesn't necessarily matter to me what your particular beliefs are about what the word hell means. That's a rabbit trail on a rabbit trail — but the idea of Jesus going into the depths of death and bringing people back out alive. And First Peter also makes reference to the flood narrative, which was the children's moment text earlier, so if you've been in the service with us, you heard the story there. And another story of 40 days of trial, right? And I couldn't help but think as Pastor Jessie was talking about natural disasters that we haven't had the earth flooded right now, but I sure am ready for whatever the rainbow is that comes out and promises no more global pandemic. There's this beautiful moment at the end of that flood story. And by the way, I know there's a ton of different flood mythologies in the world's religions, and when you encounter that kind of thing in the Bible, I think the best response is to not to say, "See, all religions believe something like this. It's just nonsense, just ignore it," but rather to say, "How is our tradition's teaching about this story different? What kind of a different picture of God does it show us?" It goes for all kinds of troubling accounts in the Bible, by the way.

But at the end of this flood narrative, the waters are receding and the rainbow is there as a promise of God's covenant, God's new relationship. And it's, yes, with Noah and, yes, with Noah's sons, but it's actually a covenant, also, with all living things; with the whole earth, which I think is just a stunningly beautiful idea. And so, I chose the song "Beautiful Things" as one of our songs to have in worship, not just because it's a great song that we love as a community but because it so wonderfully illustrates this idea that God makes beautiful things out of the dust, out of us. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.

And in this season, when we try to embody the spirit of the Christ but our bodies are impacted every single day, if not by actual sickness or actual death then by all the deadness that we experience and by all the constraints that we've taken on, restricting ourselves, our motion, our faces, and our voices in order to keep everybody safe in this season of physical deadness, I believe that there is still a spark of life for you, and for us, in the Spirit of God. That though we have been deadened in the flesh, we will be made alive in the spirit.

Last week, my family was on vacation and we were holed up in a cabin near Lake Placid. And if you think it's snowy and cold here [laughs] it was snowier and colder there. And there was a fireplace in the cabin, which we all loved. And we would put a log into the fireplace and we would get it lit. And when we did that it would be bright and warm in the room for a while. So, think of having a spiritual high, maybe — brightness and warmth spiritually that you've experienced at a time in your life. And, after a time, the light and the heat in the fireplace would fade. The log wasn't burned up, but it seemed like it was dead. Actually what we found is that you could bring it back to life. You could bring it back to light and warmth by blowing on it,

2021-02-21 Dead or Alive

gently but steadily. And, any former scouts in the room know just the way that you blow on a campfire to get it to rekindle. Interesting, isn't it, that the word for "spirit" is the same as the word for "wind" or "breath." And if you blow on this log that seems dead — we would do that and the log would start to glow, and then you'd stop blowing and it would go out again. You blow again on it and it would glow, and then it would go out again. And you blow on it again and it would glow, and then a lick of flame would appear, and eventually the log would stay lit on its own again. And so what seems spent and lifeless in that cold fireplace actually contained all that it needed to continue to burn. The problem was not that the wood had been used up. The problem was that there was a lack of oxygen. A lack of breath, a lack of spirit.

So in an ordinary year on the first Sunday in Lent, I would be encouraging you to embrace the darkness of this season. Get down into the ashes. Allow yourself to experience the sense of death. In an ordinary year, that's what I would be encouraging you to do on the first Sunday in Lent, but this is no ordinary year. I can't do that this year, at least not in the same way. So instead of encouraging you to embrace the darkness, I want to encourage you. Well, that's the end of the sentence. I want to encourage you to be *encouraged*. And where usually I would be saying all throughout Lent, "Don't rush ahead to the resurrection." And even in some church traditions (we've never been great at following this but) you're not supposed to say the word or sing the word "hallelujah" during Lent. Guess what? We're going to break that rule this year.

I want you to rush ahead to find that empty tomb, not only before it becomes empty but before they even lay Jesus's body in it, because you will find there even now, life being born out of death. Beauty, emerging from the ashes, the embers beginning to glow. Maybe they don't have their flame back, but they have some light and some heat. I don't know when we will be back to normal. I don't even know for sure when you're going to be in this room with me. But I know we won't be doing this forever. I know that there is life after suffering. So hang on just a little while longer. Any day now. Let me pray for you, and for us. God, we bless you for these stories of resurrection and ask that you bless us with them. Even though it's maybe technically too soon, in this season of Lent, we have plenty of ashes, plenty of darkness, plenty of deadness. And though the spark of resurrection won't be officially celebrated until Easter, we pray and plead with you that we would be given the grace of seeing the embers — seeing the light begin to glow and the heat begin to emanate until it can sustain itself like a log in a fireplace. May it come quickly for you, for me and for us, Artisan. And I pray in Christ's name. Amen.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).