Text: John 12:20-26

"Alright, who wants to die!" This was the question that opened up our liturgy class one afternoon, and I immediately raised my hand, which is about as good a summation of my seminary experience as you're likely to find.

We were going over occasional services. So far, we had practiced baptism on a teddy bear, and a married couple in our class had received a free, impromptu vow renewal. Now we needed a dead body for a funeral, and I was ready to volunteer. Dr. Schifrin, our professor, had me walk to the back of the church, where I stood in the entrance, a very mobile "corpse" flanked by my "pall bearers", as my friend Colin read, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the source of all mercy and the God of all consolation. He comforts us in all our sorrows so that we can comfort others in their sorrows with the consolation we ourselves have received from God."

"Thanks be to God," my classmates replied.

"I hope he comforts me during my Greek exam tomorrow," I whispered as we walked down the aisle, and one of my pallbearers rolled his eyes, which I felt was rude. People should laugh at your jokes at your own funeral. We should put that in the manual on the liturgy. Dr. Schifrin had me lay down at the front of the nave before the little steps. I crossed my arms over my chest as she began to explain that the white pall, placed on the casket of every person, rich or poor, man or woman, pastor or laity, represents the baptismal cloth, a reminder of our free and equal hope before the Lord. They pantomimed pulling this cloth over me and Colin placed his hand above my head.

"When we were baptized into Christ Jesus, we were buried therefore with him by Baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

Suddenly, with the words of Romans 6, this exercise wasn't so silly. I had no role to play, no words to speak. In my grave, more helpless than even an infant, all I could do was hear the promise of God's grace, poignantly aware that I could no more earn it than I could squander it. It is a gift given only through death.

In our Gospel text this evening, Jesus addresses a crowd made up of Greeks wishing to witness him for the first time, the Jewish people who have just welcomed him with shouts of "Hosana", and the apostles who know him well. As this crowd draws nearer, asking for revelation, they may have expected another miracle—another blind man healed or a Lazarus risen from the dead—or some practical wisdom that would break open and simplify their lives. Instead, Jesus replies, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal

life." As this crowd seeks to witness and understand the Gospel, Jesus doesn't invite them to live for him. This can feel shocking. Even in light of the resurrection, most of us would rather live for Jesus than die for him. We would rather fold God into our schedules, making room for him where he fits between all the important stuff like council meetings and sermon prep and grocery shopping. As long as we are alive, we can put a thin layer of Jesus on any activity so that it feels good and holy and righteous. Which tends to sound more appealing than death.

But if we consider the things we will sacrifice and do in the name of preserving life, this invitation is much less jarring. The world whispers to us constantly that all manner of neglect, pride, hatred, or violence can be justified for the sake of life. We may easily find ourselves keeping impossible hours, clawing for wealth or recognition, and neglecting our family or our neighbor for the sake of a lifestyle we'll never be able to attain. We pass by the widow or the sick because we're convinced we're short on time. We tally the sacrifices we would have to make to care for the poor or welcome the sojourner. Even the death of children in wombs or in school hallways is a price we're willing to pay so that our lives may go on uninterrupted. At best, we are easily gripped by distractions that call us away from the glory of God and into the false shine of self-righteousness. At worst, the gift of life itself becomes the fig-leaf we hide behind when we are trying to justify our own sin.

So when the crowd asks to see Jesus, he calls them away from all of this. He invites us to step away from the busy life of this world that would bury us alive in expectations and distractions, and instead lay down beside our Lord in the grave. Contrary to our expectations, if we are to serve Jesus, then we are to follow him into the type of death that the Christ himself endures. This is not a call to weakness or apathy, but a call to obedience. We are dying to our own will, so that the Father's will may live within us, pushing forth like wheat through the dirt and bearing the fruit of God's own heart. It is not a coincidence that Jesus gives this invitation to death a few short days before his own. As we travel towards the passion and time itself seems to slow down, the lies of the world are slowly stripped away. A meal shared with those hungering for God becomes sacred. Victory is redefined as the Lord stooping to wash the feet of those who betray him. Glorification is the messiah lifted upon the cross, coronated with thorns upon his brow. The tomb itself is transformed into a womb, cradle and grave becoming one through Jesus Christ, first fruit of the resurrection and firstborn of the dead. When we die alongside Christ, we become free. Free to seek reconciliation with those who have wounded us, free to offer sacrificial love to those who could never deserve it, free to cast all our sorrows on the sure consolation of God's own love, free to fearlessly proclaim the sure and certain hope of the Gospel. We become free to die, seeing in death only the joyful promise of eternal life.

That day when my funeral concluded, my classmates reached down into my grave and pulled me up. A better summation of the church you are unlikely to find. They were pulling me into the promises of God, the promises of new life, the same way a priest's gentle arms usher an infant through the waters of baptism and into salvation, the same way the Lord's pierced hands reach into hell to pry us free from the grip of sin. God's promise to us is not an easy life. It is not an assurance of political victory or popularity or wealth. It is much sweeter. It is the promise that wherever his servants may be, he will be there also. It is the promise that the deaf will hear and the lame will dance. That those who are hungry will be satisfied and those who are poor in spirit will feast on the bread of life. It is the promise that his servants will be clothed in the christening gowns and funeral palls of salvation. It is the promise that when we stand before him, sheep of his own fold, lambs of his own flock, sinners of his own redeeming, we are received into the arms of the one who has conquered death itself, welcomed into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and joined into the glorious company of saints to shout for joy in the presence of our Lord eternal.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, by your death you took away the sting of death. Grant to us, your servants, so to follow in faith where you have led the way, that we may at length fall asleep peacefully in you and wake in your likeness; to you, the author and giver of life, be all honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.