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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
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For ever!

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In this morning's Gospel Lesson, our Lord Jesus says this:

<sup>51</sup>I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live *for ever*... (John 6:51, RSV)

I once heard a man say that when he died, he figured that that was the end of the matter. He believed that death meant that he simply ceased to be. His day was done and there would be nothing else. "I'll simply die like a dog," he said. And I thought to myself, "Poor dogs!"

Why would he pick on the dogs? People keep doing that. They say "mean as a dog," but I don't think dogs are mean. People can be mean, and they can train a dog to be mean, but that's not natural for the dog. Meanness in a dog comes from meanness in the master.

Likewise, why would that fellow say, "die like a dog," as if the dog has no hope of heaven? As far as I can remember, there is no dogmatic settlement that excludes dogs from heaven. I bet they do go to heaven. I mean, how can heaven be heaven for Timmy if Lassie is not there? And Carol and I sure look forward to seeing our dear old cat Hobo again.

So, I do not assume that there is nothing beyond death for a dog or a cat. Nor do I believe that there is nothing beyond death for any of us -- not even for the one who is convinced that death is the end of the line. After all, we live by faith, each of us! Even the calmest atheist lives by faith. In this case, he lives by faith that there is no life on the other side of death. He cannot *prove* this. All he can do is live *as if it is so*, not really knowing whether it is so. He lives by faith. But it is a grim faith. The Church believes that Jesus is resurrected from the dead. If so, then there is indeed something beyond death. There is eternity. This is a much more cheerful faith when you ponder the idea that eternity lies in the hands of Jesus, because Jesus is such a good person. I am happy to trust eternity to him.

## **A GREAT STRETCH OF TIME**

What a great long stretch of time Jesus speaks of in this morning's lesson. He speaks of forever:

<sup>51</sup>I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live *for ever*.

This is great! This is something most needful for us because you and I have miles to go before we are perfect. Compared to God, we are simply wee little ones. We have only just begun our walk toward the perfect humanity our Maker intends for us. Who knows how long Adam and Eve had lived in the Garden before they fell? Maybe it was centuries, maybe it was millennia. But however long it was, they were not finished. They might have had learning and wisdom that far exceeded our own, but even if so, they were not yet perfect. Death got in their way.

And miserable death gets in our way too. But it just is not right. It is not what our Maker intended for us. I spoke a bit in a recent sermon about Beethoven and his faithful stewardship of his gifts for music. He was born with extraordinary gifts for music, but never rested on his gifts, but rather kept working at his craft his whole life long. People say that his late string quartets, for example, when he had suffered blow upon blow throughout his life, from losing his hearing, to giving up his hopes for romance and family, to near poverty and the suicide attempt of a beloved nephew -- none of these blows finished him. Those late string quartets are considered masterpieces, some of the most sublime creations of humanity. But all that creativity was cut short by death. His death was an assault on our whole human race. Every death is such an assault, whether it is Beethoven's or Van Gogh's or Einstein's or any one at all!

Each of us has hopes and dreams that are threatened by death. Each of us has hopes and dreams and work begun and gifts granted us that just cannot be encompassed within this world's threescore and ten years. To be a human being is to long for more time and the health we need to go with that time. *This* is what Jesus promises in this morning's text. It is a great promise indeed.

## **TIME CAN LIE HEAVY ON OUR HANDS**

Let me pause for a moment to try to reckon with the reality that sometimes time lies heavy on our hands. I have said that death is an assault upon humanity, that often we can sense that death just is not right, that it is against the will of our Maker who desires that we should have life, even everlasting life.

But we might tremble a bit before that phrase I just used, "everlasting life." In certain lights, this sounds good. It sounds exactly what we need. But in other lights, it sounds like an awfully long time! Maybe longer that we would like. Maybe longer that we think we can endure. Maybe we fear that we will end up in the madhouse if we must live *for ever*!

So, we believe our Lord Jesus. We do in fact believe that he is the Bread of Life and that those who come to him will have life *for ever*. What we need to do now is to reckon with the idea that *we* who are to live for ever will be changed! We will still be *we*! still you and me! However, we will be changed. Indeed, we will be improved.

I mean, if we had to go through eternity the same old people we are now, that doesn't sound so good. There seem to come seasons in our lives when time passes oh, so slowly. Perhaps we are in a stretch of illness. Perhaps we are depressed.

Perhaps a great joy in our life has left us, so that we grieve. We remember a time when we used to spring out of bed, full of energy and enthusiasm for the day. But now, our hearts are heavy and going through the day is more a matter of one dutiful step after another.

Or perhaps we remember a time when we felt that we belonged in this world, that we had not done anything so wrong that we had somehow lost our sense of fit. But now, we are burdened by consciousness of sin. We feel that not only has our sin threatened to ruin life for someone else, but it also threatens to ruin life for us too. So, time lies heavy on our hands. If living *for ever* amounts to an endless prolongation of *this*, then it does not sound so good.

But the good news is that the Bible says that we have some growth ahead of us. Now we are, as it were, mere children compared to the maturity toward which we are heading. Let me lift up some Bible passages along these lines:

<sup>2</sup>Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be *like him*, for we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:2, RSV)

Notice that phrase, "like him." John means like God! It turns out that Jesus was not kidding when he preached that we should become "perfect":

<sup>48</sup>Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. (Matthew 5:48, KJV)

St. Paul also preached that we shall be changed:

<sup>51</sup>Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be *changed*, <sup>52</sup>in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. <sup>53</sup>For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. (1 Corinthians 15:51-53, RSV)

<sup>18</sup>And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed *into his likeness* from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18, RSV)

For some people, they might well need a good long stretch of "for ever" simply to reach the likeness of Christ for which we are meant. Our talents might take much more honing, and our spirits might need to become much more wise and pure. The wounds of childhood might take a long time to straighten out. If the serial murderer can by God's grace be saved, if Hitler or Stalin can come to full

repentance, that might take a good long stretch of “for ever,” for our God seems never to simply overwhelm human nature. Even the disciples called from their fishing nets and privileged to walk with Jesus seemed to improve only by fits and starts. It took them some time to become saints. Likewise with us: a good long stretch of forever might be needed simply for us to become not just saints, but truly Christ-like.

And then, when we have reached that full maturity in Christ, time will no longer lie heavy with us. Talk about springing out of bed in the morning ready to take on adventures! That will be our daily state. Jesus said it long ago: he has come that we might have life, and have it “abundantly”:

<sup>10</sup>The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.

Perhaps you have known some time of trial or sickness, and then you have come through it. Or perhaps you have lamented some deep sin, but at last you confessed that sin and received absolution. *Then* you feel ready for life. Then you can turn to life with no hesitation. Eternity is simply the length of time it takes to become like our Lord Jesus and to be ready to enjoy life henceforth.

So let it come! Let forever soon arrive. Jesus has eternity in mind for us. He is the Bread of Life, who mean to give us life for ever! So, let it come soon.

## **UNLIKELY, EXCEPT TO FAITH**

Martin Luther had a wonderful sense of sympathy for how hard it is to believe in eternal life. He knows that our Lord’s promise to live “for ever” seems unlikely in face of all the sorrows we behold in this world. But Luther urges us to cling to the promise of Jesus in spite of what we see. Our Lord’s promise will not fail us:

But in the meantime we do perceive death approaching, or we witness the death of others by pestilence or by the sword, or we encounter perils, are thrown into prison, or contract sickness. We see the devil, sin, and all sorts of distress; but Christ we do not see. You must not judge, however, by external appearance; you must be guided by the Word, which promises and gives you everlasting life. Then you truly have eternal life. Even though your senses tell you otherwise, this does not matter... But you will retort: “The fact remains that I must die.” Oh, this makes no difference! Just go ahead and die in God’s name, submit to being burned or killed in a different manner. You are still assured of eternal life; it will surely be yours. To die, to be buried, to have people tread on your grave, to be consumed by worms—all this will not

matter to you. It is certain that Christ will raise you up again. For here you have My promise: “I will raise you up.” Therefore your eyes *will behold* what your faith so confidently relied on.<sup>1</sup>

## ABIDING WITH CHRIST

So far I fear I have been too much leaving daily life here and now out of the discussion, as if Jesus promises everlasting life, and we will enjoy it regardless of how we live these threescore and ten years granted to us here below. But judging by this morning’s Gospel text, there is a *personal* side to this. It has to do with what our text calls “abiding” with Christ:

<sup>56</sup>He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood *abides* in me, and I in him. (John 6:56, RSV)

Luther did not mean to exclude a sacramental understanding of this passage, but that is not what he emphasizes in his commentary on this passage. Yes, we eat the flesh and drink the blood of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, but Luther is pointing to something even more basic than that. Luther says that “eating and drinking” here must be understood to mean coming to faith in Jesus. Without such faith, eating and drinking the Blessed Sacrament do not help, for even a cow can eat and drink bread and wine.

Ah, but coming to “faith in Jesus” turns out to be a more complex thing that we might at first think. Faith in Jesus is not simply intellectual assent to various truths about Jesus. No, for Luther, and for Jesus himself, judging by this text, faith in him involves “abiding” in him and he in us.

Christ is serious when He says that you will abide in Him and He in you if you believe in Him. He says: “It matters not if you are still somewhat weak, for I am in you. If you lack anything, I have an abundance of righteousness, holiness, and wisdom; I have no weaknesses. But if you are weak, your weakness is in Me, and I will see to it that I help you, that I drown your weakness in My strength and power, that I delete your sin in My righteousness, that I devour your death in My life.” This is the true meaning and significance, the sum and

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<sup>1</sup>Luther, M. (1999, c1959). *Vol. 23: Luther's works, vol. 23 : Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 6-8* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (23:130). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

substance, of this text, that He abides in him who believes in Him.<sup>2</sup>

Adding things up, I think we arrive at this point: our Lord Jesus is indeed the Bread of Life, promising the everlasting life we imperfect ones need for our journey on toward the perfection our Maker intended. And we get this Bread of Life in us by clinging to Jesus here and now. We throw our stock in with him. We say it and we mean it, “I am sticking with this man, Jesus I am ordering my life according to the ways of this man. I am choosing and I am refraining and I am doing and I am loving after the manner of this man, Jesus. I am paying my ticket and taking my ride with him!” For to him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup>Luther, M. (1999, c1959). *Vol. 23: Luther's works, vol. 23 : Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 6-8* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (23:147). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.