

Years Ago People Didn't Know

Hebrews 4:12-16

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David Ropeik remembers going to bed one night when he was 11, seriously afraid he would not be alive the next morning. It was October, 1962, and the frightening cold war between the U.S. and Soviet Union had become terrifyingly real. (<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/the-rise-of-nuclear-fear-how-we-learned-to-fear-the-bomb/>)

That night he had watched a stern President Kennedy on television reveal that Soviet missiles were being installed in Cuba and he was ordering a blockade of Soviet ships. (Ibid)

The world was on the brink of nuclear war. David Ropeik was afraid, and he wasn't alone. (Ibid)

Some wonder if we may be returning to that kind of standoff with North Korea. The North Koreans have put Guam on alert. Our own president has used words like "fire and fury" to describe our response to North Korea's threats. He has sent cryptic messages like, "There's only one thing left to do." The North Koreans seem intent on continuing with their nuclear program until they have a nuclear missile that can reach the continental United States.

More and more people are feeling a fear and dread about the future. The day may come when the kind of fear felt by David Ropeik may return and be felt by us all.

Perhaps you have felt a fear of death this real or can imagine what it might feel like to have a cloud of death hanging over you. Death is coming for all of us, but most of us manage to live day-to-day without thinking too much about it.

Today we remember the lives of people we have lost in our church and many of you remember the lives of friends and loved ones you have lost since last year on this All Saints Sunday. Our thoughts are especially with you as we know death has changed the landscape of your lives. We know that as you grieve you are adjusting to a new reality.

Most of us escape every day thoughts of death unless we are diagnosed with a serious illness or the life of someone in our family is in danger. But many throughout our country have been plagued with hurricanes, fires, and mass shootings and we still have police officers, first responders, and soldiers placing their lives on the line for us every day. These people stay in touch with the reality that life is a gift and tomorrow is not promised.

Even with all our own personal tragedies, many of our own making, it is still difficult to imagine the fear of death that plagued the people in the late 1400's and early 1500's.

For over 60 years a highly contagious mysterious disease swept through Europe. It was known as the English sweating sickness and it eventually wiped out 60% of Europe's population.

There was no Center for Disease Control so the cause of this disease was mostly unknown, creating many false claims about the disease, superstitions, and poor theology to develop.

Death was more prevalent, more unexpected, and more likely to strike a community and a family suddenly. This reality, combined with the teaching that one's fate beyond death was likely to be laced with suffering, caused people to sit up and pay attention, lest they miss the chance at heaven, and spend eternity in hell or be caught somewhere in between.

When it came to shaping the belief system of the people, there was one dominant voice in those days, the voice of the Pope of the Catholic Church.

With death as a prominent theme in the lives of the people, fear was stoked and it was used to the advantage of the Church.

Precisely, it was the fear of what happens to you beyond death that was used to drive people to the sacraments of the Church.

The Church invented a place called purgatory where people go when they die if they had any unconfessed sin. Nowhere in the Bible is purgatory mentioned, but the people did not have access to the Bible, so they did not know.

Since we all fall short of God's standards often, sometimes without even knowing, the likelihood that a person would die with unconfessed sin was high.

The people were told that the more unconfessed sin they had in their lives at death, the longer they had to stay in purgatory before they could be released from their suffering and admitted into the bliss of heaven.

Of course, the really bad people went straight to hell. But the descriptions of purgatory didn't seem to be much better.

The greater the complacency among those who were not bad enough for hell, but not good enough for heaven, the longer they had to remain in the God-forsaken place where people suffered and lived out their sentences. This could be thousands of years. So people approached death with great dread and fear.

One of the first books ever published shows Christ as a judge with a sword protruding from his ear, ready to doom the damned, aided by the devils who would drag them by their hair into the flames of hell. Christ was seen as a God and judgment. This book was published in 1493, the same year Columbus discovered America. (Here I Stand- A Life of Martin Luther, Roland H. Bainton, Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1950, p. 14)

So this was the picture the church gave the people of Jesus. Fear him. Fear death. Do penance. Perhaps you remember that phrase, "Do penance," from last Sunday's sermon.

The Church taught that the people must do penance, or make amends for their wrongs, in one of two ways to escape purgatory.

One way was to become a monk. Through living the very disciplined and hard life of a monk, it was possible, but not guaranteed that you could escape purgatory. It was not a guarantee you would escape purgatory, but the monk's life was supposed to keep one from sin, so it was supposed to help. Of course, this was only possible for a man.

The second way was by the purchase of indulgences. An indulgence was a way the church devised for you to pay money to have your sins absolved by the priest. With all the sin going on, the priest shouldn't have been lacking for work.

It was into this kind of world that Martin Luther was born over 500 years ago.

Luther's parents, Hans and Margarete, had great plans for Luther. His father managed to leave behind the life of a peasant farmer and made a better living for his family as a copper miner in Mansfield, Germany.

That enabled Luther to attend a boarding school, then the town's parish school, before he was off to the University at Erfurt when he was 18 to work on his master's degree. There he took the required subjects of grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. (<http://www.luther.de/en/uniwes.html#sfk>)

Following the completion of his master's degree, he could continue with his doctorate degree. The only three subjects that one could specialize in were law, medicine, and theology. The world spun around these three subjects. Luther was there to study law. That way, he could provide an income for himself, but also for his family. (<http://www.luther.de/en/geburt.html>)

While Luther was studying at Erfurt, something happened that some might see as God's fateful hand at work. Once, while he was in the library, he found a great bound book that turned out to be the Vulgate Latin translation of the Holy Bible. (A Man Called Luther)

This Bible would not have been a printed version of the Bible, but rather a hand-copied Bible, every letter, every page. The printing press was just in its infancy, so Bibles were still very rare.

Luther was like every other Catholic of his day; he'd never had an opportunity to read from the Bible. He'd only heard readings from the Bible at mass. What's more, he had been taught that only the clergy could properly understand and interpret the Bible. (Ibid)

Luther had just begun his study of law at Erfurt when his life took a dramatic change. One night, as he was returning to the university from a visit to see his parents, he got caught in a lightning storm. The bolts of lightning were strong enough to knock him to the ground and Luther thought he was going to die.

Every fear of the afterlife that had been instilled in him by the Catholic church rushed into his mind and he cried out to one of the Saints of the Catholic Church: “St. Ann help me. I will become a monk,” he said. (A Man Named Luther Part 1)

His decision to become a monk was motivated by his fear of death more than it was a felt calling. Nevertheless, he made a vow and he did not change it in hopes that his self-denial and constant efforts to rid himself of sin would give him a better chance of escaping suffering in the afterlife. (Ibid)

Two weeks later Luther entered one of the most demanding monasteries in the world.

He threw himself into the disciplines of self-denial by a vow of poverty, the denial of the basic comforts of life, by wearing uncomfortable clothes, and sleeping on an uncomfortable bed. He denied himself everything but the basic of food and he fasted often.

He even beat himself to identify with the sufferings of Jesus. He confessed his sins so much to Father Staupitz, the head of the monastery once told not to come back to confession until he sinned and had something to confess.

But Luther was tormented with the thought of dying with some sin unconfessed. He'd rather suffer here than end up suffering in eternity.

But the very life he wanted live in order to find peace so he could enter eternity and be accepted by God, only made his life more miserable than the life he had before he became a monk.

Luther later wrote: "I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I." (<http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1501-1600/martin-luther-monumental-reformer-11629922.html>)

“All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, readings and other work.” (Ibid)

Staupitz, the head of the monastery, saw something in Luther that Luther could not see in himself. He offered Luther an opportunity to leave the monastery and return to the university and complete a doctor of theology degree and become the chief theological professor at Wittenberg. Reluctantly, Luther accepted. He took the job at Wittenberg University with this vow, “I swear to defend the evangelical truth vigorously.” (<http://martinluther.ccws.org/professor/index.html>)

Remember that Bible that Luther once saw in the library at Erfurt?

Well, now, not only did Luther have access to the scriptures, but he began consuming them. He read the Bible through every six months.

“He compared the Bible to a mighty tree and every word of it to little twigs, and he claimed that he knocked on every one of these twigs to discover what they might be able to teach him.” (Ibid)

What he learned, he began to teach others through his lectures and through his preaching. What he began to learn and teach became the freeing of his soul that he'd been looking for all his life.

What Luther discovered was contradictory to what he had been taught throughout his life.

500 years ago, people didn't know that anyone could have communion with God without the intercession of a priest. (Ibid)

They didn't know that righteousness (being right in God's eyes) is based on faith, not on works and was available to every believer. (Ibid)

They didn't know there was no purgatory. Luther discovered the practice of the Church of charging people an indulgence or a fee to have their sins forgiven was a fraud.

The practice to reduce the number of years people would spend in purgatory or to free a dead relative from purgatory was nothing more than the Pope's scam to raise money for his expensive building projects in Rome.

For Luther, the Bible became the standard for truth, not the Pope, and Luther staked his life on it, literally.

This has become known as "Sola Scriptura," to many. In other words, if your beliefs about God and how God relates to man, how we relate to God, and to one another cannot be validated by the total message of the Bible, not just a single verse taken out of context, but the total message to the Bible, then they should not be normative for the Christian.

We must be very careful about cherry picking verses without looking at the total message of the Bible or we would be stoning adulterers, allowing polygamy, and validating slavery like our Southern Baptists ancestors did when our denomination began.

Knowing that, the statement of faith we affirm in our church and many Baptists still affirms, the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message, says that "The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ." Jesus is the sieve through which we measure our theology. (1963 Baptist Faith and Message).

There are many things done in God's name in the Old Testament that would not pass the Jesus test, so they should not be normative for our lives.

All of us realize that even if we agree on a statement like this, agreeing on an interpretation and application on all issues will still be impossible.

There are those who would like to be Popes among us even today, wishing to be the definitive word of truth on all matters of theology.

However, we are Baptists because we affirm that that no one person or group of persons has the right has the right to dictate to us how we must interpret the Bible.

Of course, we are all held responsible how we handle God's truth and how we live it. Our freedom comes with great responsibility.

Luther discovered that the Church had placed the Pope in a position where no one had the right to argue or challenge his authority even when his decisions were a direct contradiction of the Bible. The people were being taken advantage of and they didn't even know it.

So on October 31, 1517, he nailed 95 grievances to the door of All Saints Church where he preached. This was one way in a university town of saying, "Let's have a conversation."

Luther wasn't trying to shake up the world. He was trying to shake the consciences of a university town.

He had no way of knowing that these grievances would be spread throughout Germany and into Rome and other European countries.

What made this possible was the invention of the printing press.

His grievances hit the printing press and they were off to the masses.

In these grievances, Luther challenged the Pope. He challenged the way the Church raised its money. He challenged how people confessed their sins.

Luther "set free a gospel that had been held captive for nearly 1200 years" because at that time, no one had access to the God's word. (A Man Named Luther.)

He set in motion what later became known as the Protestant Reformation.

No one knew how perverted their religion had become. No one knew how gracious their God was. No one could "grasp how wide and long and high and deep the love of Christ is."

No one could know that his love surpasses knowledge. No one could be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:18-19)

Luther gave the people a new image of Christ. Jesus did not come because he was ready to slay them or us for our missteps.

Luther showed them Jesus that had wept over the city of Jerusalem.

Luther showed them a Jesus who chastised the disciples for not letting the children come to him.

Luther showed them a Jesus who did not condemn the woman caught in adultery but told her accusers, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."

Luther showed them a Jesus who healed lepers and forgave sinners, who ate with tax collectors, and who allowed women of ill repute to anoint him.

Luther showed them a Jesus who died for their sins and a Jesus who was raised from the dead so that their transgressions could be removed as far as the east is from the west.

For the first time, because of Luther, people began to enter death unafraid to meet their Maker because they felt God's peace that their sins were forgiven, because we worship a God who saves us by grace, through faith, a gift which none of us have earned, but we can only receive.

Death will come to some of us quickly. It will come like a thief in the night. Death will steal some us away before we've had a chance to live and offer the potential that is within us, causing us to doubt and struggle with our faith.

Death will come before some have ever left the womb.

Death will announce its coming and before it comes the suffering will be so great we will be asking why it is taking so long.

However death comes, it will come. It will not skip one of us.

My friends, we can come to death's door and be comforted with the knowledge that God is going to gently guide us through the next door of life because Jesus said when he ascended into heaven that he was going to prepare a place for us so that we could go and be where he is.

We can know this is true, not because we have been there, but because Jesus has been here, not just historically, but through his Holy Spirit He has been here—in our hearts, in our daily lives if we have invited Him to be. His Spirit is the guarantee of our salvation.

We don't need a Pope, but we still need a priest. Our priest is Jesus, whom the writer of Hebrews called the "Great High Priest who has passed through the heavens. Jesus is our bridge between earth and heaven.

"¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:15-16 NIV)

Today, come and receive Jesus. Come pray to receive the mercy and grace of Jesus. Have faith that the Lord will continue to care for you even after this life is over.

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