

## WE SHALL BE LIKE HIM

1 John 2:28-3:3; Edward Wessel Memorial; April 28, 2018

Alleluia! Christ is risen!  
**He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

I don't think I've ever met someone who was excited to die. I've known Christians who have suffered so long or so greatly that they long for their suffering to end and know that will only happen at their deaths, but they don't long for death itself. Death is the enemy of the living, the enemy Christ Jesus came to defeat for us.

But when Ed went to the hospital and it became clear to everyone, including him, that he was not going to recover from this illness, he got excited about finally getting to see what eternal life with God was going to be like. He described it like having a Christmas gift that he was excited to open.

Thinking of his coming death in terms of a Christmas gift says as much about Ed's faith in God and the kind of life he had growing up. Ed's experience was not like today when kids go to multiple grandparents' houses and receive many costly gifts, exchanged gifts with others, and still have many gifts to open at home. Most children today cannot relate to looking forward with excitement to opening a single gift at Christmas. But Ed came from humble roots. He grew up excited about opening a single Christmas gift with the full understanding that it cost very little; there was no money in the household for expensive gifts. And in order for your parents to give you and your many brothers and sisters that one gift meant that they had to make real sacrifices.

Ed looked at his coming death with the wonder of an excited kid getting a Christmas gift. That's how he described it to his family and others who came to see him before he died. He wondered what eternal life with God would be like. That it was likened to a gift given to a poor child demonstrated his understanding of it as grace. This poor, miserable sinner was about to receive a gift of immeasurable cost from His dear Father in heaven. The poverty of sin and death in this world was about to be overcome with the riches of God's love and mercy in Jesus Christ.

Eternal life is a gift, not something earned. We receive it by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. God's children know that they are heirs of it for Christ's sake. Now, Ed marveled at what that life was going to be like after his body died. None of us knows because the only thing we know from experience is life and death in this sinful world. St. John in his First Epistle admitted this when he wrote: **Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared.** This verse highlights the reality that Christians live by faith, not by sight. What we “**will be**” won't be seen until the Last Day when Christ returns visibly in glory to raise us from the dead. St. John makes this clear by going on to say: **But we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is.**

Even Ed has not seen that Day of our Lord's appearing. He does not yet know what it will be like to live in a glorious body like that of Jesus Christ. He does know more than we do because he is in and sees the glories of heaven with God and the Lamb on the throne. But he still waits with all the saints for the “resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.” That Day will be a true Christmas Day, and the gift we will “open” will be our resurrected flesh. The incarnate God will give us flesh like His in which to live forever.

Of course, Ed knew all this. His goal was not just to “get to heaven” and see what that was like. He was looking forward with joyful expectation to experience life with God not corrupted by sin and death, a life that would reach its fulfillment when Christ raised him and gave eternal life to him in his body. Today we give thanks to God that Ed has opened the first part of that gift and knows what it is like.

When I visited Ed in the hospital for the last time there were other things on his mind. Loel told me that he wanted to talk to me before he died, so I was curious what it was. The family members gathered in his hospital room were dismissed and he expressed his concerns to me. Without breaking any confidences – his concerns were not really secrets but things he wanted to say to me without others around – he expressed to me his concern for me as a pastor as well as for the ongoing care of his family. As I have thought about his words to me, I have come to understand that they are related.

His concern about the church and me as a pastor had to do with how the congregation was shrinking. It is a fact is that there are fewer people in the church these days. His concern was not that I or Pastor Fast were doing anything wrong, but that fewer people had a love for the pure gospel and the desire to be in the Lord's house. He was concerned that seeing this I would become discouraged. In relation to his family, it was his heart's desire is that all of you remain in the true faith so that you will join him in glory.

Some husbands and fathers have as a goal to leave behind a legacy of wealth to their family. That was not Ed's concern. He rejoiced in the true riches God had given to him, and wanted everyone to share those riches with him. The forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation by grace through faith in Jesus were gifts he treasured throughout his life. He was raised in that faith, the faith he and Sylvia raised their children. His faith was in Jesus who died because of his sins and was raise to life to declare him righteous. His words to me echoed those of the elderly apostle John in our Epistle for today. **And now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears we may have confidence and not shrink from Him in shame at His coming.**

Ed's willingness to serve his Church many years on the District and Synod mission boards reflected this. He wanted everyone to hear and believe the good news of Jesus and be saved. It was shown in his efforts in establishing Martin Luther High School, so that children could receive a faithful Lutheran education. When Jesus appears on the Last Day, Ed wants to stand with his wife, children, and children's children, and all others with the confidence of true faith in Jesus. As St. John wrote: **See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.**

Ed's Confirmation Verse from Psalm 26 is a reflection of his abiding trust in God's gifts. **Lord, I love the habitation of Your house, and the place where Your glory dwells.** He loved being with God in His house in this life and looked with joy and expectation to opening the gift of eternal life in heaven, which he has now received. He loved being here to lift up his voice in song to God. I expect he is doing that there in glory even now. He is experiencing something we have not, at least, not yet.

But there is something all of us, including Ed, are waiting for, and that is the return of Christ in glory on the Last Day when He will raise us and all the dead, and give eternal life to all believers in Christ. All of God's children, living and with the Lord in glory, are waiting for that. And we do know what that gift will be like when we receive it. As St. John wrote: **Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is.**

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Amen.