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## *Death has Occurred and “This Changes Everything”*

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith**  
**Lent 5 – Year A**

In the name of God: “Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend.” Amen. —*The Hymnal*, no. 388, “O Worship the King,” v.5

It’s the fifth week of Lent! That means that Lent is almost over. And next Sunday begins Holy Week. It begins with the Liturgy of the Palms, which is a festive and joyous occasion. But that’s immediately followed by the observance of Our Lord’s Passion. And that shift can take our breath away. Because in the span of one morning’s service we go from identifying ourselves with the crowds—the crowds who joyfully welcome Jesus into holy Jerusalem—to identifying ourselves with the mob shouting in front of Pontius Pilate for Jesus’ crucifixion.

As your preacher on this occasion, and in this calm before the storm, I offer you another opportunity to reflect on our Lenten themes of death and dying. In particular, as we approach Holy Week, I want to focus on the death and dying of a deity, or the death and dying of a divine being. But I also want to share with you a personal and frightful event of near death that I experienced myself, just a few months ago.

Turning first to the death of divine beings, you need to know something about Atlanta that some of us natives may remember but most newcomers and visitors never get to explore. In 1966 death of God theology was inaugurated right here in our fair city. Indeed my own place of employment, the religion department of Emory University, served as one of the sponsoring institutions. It was there that my predecessor in the department taught and wrote: the theologian Thomas J.J. Altizer. You may remember that name, “Altizer.” Some of us may also recall that famous or infamous issue of Time magazine, dated April 8, 1966, that has the iconic cover: blazing out of a black background are the bold red letters posing the question, “Is God Dead?”

Well, here’s a humorous rendition of all that drama that got stirred up back then. It’s written as a mock obituary that portrays Altizer as a kind of surgeon presiding over the demise of a patient. The spoof was written, also in 1966, by a student—Anthony Towne, attending at that time I believe Boston University School of Theology. He wrote it the following piece as “a religious satire poking fun at those who see God and the trinity in a simplistic anthropomorphic way.” (Accessed 4/1/2017 at: [https://books.google.com/books/about/God\\_is\\_Dead\\_in\\_Georgia.html?id=9qSZoAEACAAI](https://books.google.com/books/about/God_is_Dead_in_Georgia.html?id=9qSZoAEACAAI)) But of course we Christians do think of Jesus in an anthropomorphic way: as the God-Man who existed, lived and died like one of us. But let’s come back to that later.

Now there are a couple of versions of this satire that you can find on the internet. One version is titled, “Eminent Deity Succumbs in Georgia.” It was published in the form of a newspaper article with a byline that reads simply, “Atlanta, Ga. Nov. 9” (no author listed; accessed 4/1/2017 at <http://newspapers.bc.edu/cgi-bin/bostonsh?a=d&d=bcheights19660311.2.32>). But there’s a different version with a more compelling title that reads, “God is Dead in Georgia.” And it carries this subtitle that hints right away at the contents of the article:

Eminent Deity Succumbs During Surgery: Succession in Doubt as All Creation Groans: LBJ Orders Flags at Half Staff

(Accessed 4/1/2017 at: [https://books.google.com/books/about/God\\_is\\_Dead\\_in\\_Georgia.html?id=9qSZoAEACAAI](https://books.google.com/books/about/God_is_Dead_in_Georgia.html?id=9qSZoAEACAAI)).

So here are some brief excerpts that I've selected. I've tried to limit the selections to those that most connect with our Lenten themes, or to our current political climate, and to world affairs, and finally to the Episcopal Church. But there are a few lines that I couldn't resist because they are hilarious as stand-alone comments. Just remember that it's satire, and let yourself enjoy it as if it were a mock obituary announcing the death of a well-known celebrity. "God," it begins:

God, creator of the universe, principal deity of the world's Jews, ultimate reality of Christians, and most eminent of all divinities, died late yesterday during major surgery undertaken to correct a massive diminishing influence. His exact age is not known, but close friends estimate that it greatly exceeded that of all other extant beings. The cause of death could not be immediately determined, but the deity's surgeon, Thomas J. J. Altizer, 38, of Emory University in Atlanta, indicated possible cardiac insufficiency. . .

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In Johnson City, Texas, President Johnson . . . at once directed that all flags should be at half-staff until after the funeral . . . Both Houses of Congress met in Washington at noon today and promptly adjourned after passing a joint resolution expressing "grief and great respect for the departed spiritual leader." Senator Wayne Morse, Democrat of Oregon, objected on, the grounds that the resolution violated the principle of separation of church and state, but he was overruled by Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who remarked that "this is not a time for partisan politics."

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In Paris, President de Gaulle in a thirty second appearance on national television, proclaimed "God is dead! Long live the Republic! Long Live France!" News of the death was included in a one-sentence statement, without comment, on the third page of Pravda, official organ of the Soviet Government.

And here I repeat: "a one-sentence statement, without comment, on the third page." To continue:

Public reaction in *this* country was perhaps summed up by an elderly retired streetcar conductor in Passaic, N.J., who said: "I never met him, of course . . . But from what I heard I guess he was a real nice fellow. Tops." From Independence, Mo., former President Harry S. Truman, who received the news in his Kansas City barbershop, said "I'm always sorry to hear somebody is dead. It's a [darn] shame."

By the way, you may appreciate that I just edited that comment, based on an actual Truman quotation, I believe. And now this:

From Basel, Switzerland, came word that Dr. Karl Barth, venerable Protestant theologian, informed of the death of God, declared: "I don't know who died in Atlanta, but whoever he was he's an imposter."

Now here I interrupt these humorous ventures to alert us that the author turns next to include Jesus himself in this satire. In particular you may observe that he makes direct references to our upcoming Sunday of the Passion. "There have been unconfirmed reports," he writes,

There have been unconfirmed reports that Jesus of Nazareth, 33, a carpenter and reputed son of God, who survives, will assume the authority, if not the title, of the deceased deity. [S]ometimes called the Christ, [he] was himself a victim of death, having succumbed some [1900] years ago . . . on orders of a Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and at the behest of certain citizens of Jerusalem. This event, described by some as "deicide," has lately occupied the deliberations of the Vatican Council, who has solemnly exonerated the Jews generally of responsibility for the alleged crime. The case is complicated by the fact that Jesus, although he died, returned to life, and so may not have died at all. [In that connection] Diplomats around the world were speculating today on the place the resurrected Jesus will occupy in the power vacuum created by the sudden passing of God.)

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Dr. Altizer indicated, finally, that he had personal confidence that Jesus, relieved of the burdens of divinity, would, in

time, assume a position of great importance in the universe. "We have lost," he said, "a father, but we have gained a son."

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There has been as yet no statement from Jesus [himself], but a close associate, the Holy Ghost . . . said that it is the wish of the family that in lieu of flowers contributions be made to the Building Fund of [the Episcopal Cathedral of] St. John the Divine in New York City so that the edifice may be finished.

(Anthony Towne, "God is Dead in Georgia," reprinted by James Burl Hogins and Robert E. Yarber, eds., *Phase Blue: A Systems Approach to College English*; Chicago: Science Research Assoc., 1970; p. 260-263. An original version appeared in the Methodist student publication, *Motive Magazine*, Boston University School of Theology, and was excerpted in the Boston College publication: *The Heights*, Vol. XLVI, No. 20, 11; March 1966, p. 4. Accessed 3/31/2017 at: <http://newspapers.bc.edu/cgi-bin/bostonsh?a=d&d=bcheights19660311.2.32>.)

Well, that last line is an inside-joke because, as many of us know, it is likely that our Episcopal Cathedral in New York is never going to be finished. The cornerstone for the building was laid in 1892, and there followed a century of setbacks including two world wars. So since the 1990s, when our own Harry Pritchett was Dean of the Cathedral, it has been nicknamed 'St. John the Unfinished.' (*St. John The Unfinished; Dean of Cathedral on Morningside Heights Vows to Fix What He's Got, Not Build More*; New York Times, January 10, 1999; accessed 4/1/2017 at: <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/01/10/nyregion/st-john-unfinished-dean-cathedral-morningside-heights-vows-fix-what-he-s-got-not.html>)

Well, there you have it; line after line of wit and whimsy—and of anthropomorphizing God! I hope you appreciate the effort of a theology student to get us laughing about the ways we conceive of God. On the one hand there is 'God like us' in the person of the divine and human Jesus Christ—who like us experienced death and dying. On the other hand there is 'God beyond us' who is beyond death and dying; 'the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ' as we Christians profess and believe.

In connection with God-like-us in the person of Jesus Christ, I want to share with you my own recent adventure in death and dying. It occurred last November, on Thanksgiving Day, in the form of a near fatal car accident. I walked away with minor injuries, thanks be to God! And thanks be to my guardian angels, who were working overtime for me, as we say. And no one else was impacted, double thanks be to God, I'm eager to say too.

And here's what I learned, that I speculate was also what Lazarus learned after being rescued from death in today's gospel story. I learned that surviving a near death experience 'changes everything.' That's right, to quote Naomi Kline's compelling book title: "This changes everything." And although I walked away from that car crash with my mind and body still alive and sound, still alert and intact, something did die for me that day in a way that changes everything. Some things are *truly* less urgent and important for me. And some other things are *really* more compelling and important for me. And some kind of death occurred, though I walked away alive. And now I can say as a statement of faith, '*this changes everything*.'

It's a statement of faith and it remains a mystery to me what is the precise thing that dies in us through such deep encounters with death and dying: encounters like the death and dying of loved ones near us, or encounters like our own near-death experiences, or encounters like our Lenten journeys of accompanying Jesus on his way to the Cross. I'm not sure, but maybe it's the death of what the celebrated devotional writer and British evangelical, Oswald Chambers, called the 'disposition of exercising my claim to my right to myself.' ("The disposition of sin is not immorality and wrong-doing, but the disposition of self-realization – I am my own god. This disposition may work out in decorous morality or in indecorous immorality, but it has the one basis, my claim to my right to myself."~Oswald Chambers as accessed 4/1/2017 at: <http://gfmanchester.com/sin-defined-is-my-claim-to-my-right-to-myself-oswald-chambers>). Well, it's probably not something that has really died—the 'disposition of exercising my claim to my right to myself.' But maybe it's a disposition that has been put on notice in our lives; put on notice that its days are limited and its sway is diminishing in our lives. Most likely it's not dead but succumbing to the Spirit of God who is the Lord of life, as St. Paul declares in today's reading from Romans:

If the Spirit of [the one] who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, [the one] who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you (Romans 8:11).

How about for you? What's died for you on your Lenten journey in this year of 2017? Whether or not we've been able to keep a holy Lent so far we can still consider what it would involve. What would it take to put to death in ourselves something that hinders the fullness of life and freedom in Christ that we commit to in our Baptismal vows? [\[1\]](#) In any case it's not over yet; it's not too late to consider and respond to the claims of a holy Lent!

Yes, on this Lenten journey we're asked by holy church to keep company with Jesus in his Lenten journey—to become more mindful of our own journey too; mindful of the ways in which our own lives are tending toward death, or subject to crucifixion-like experiences, or going through some kind of death so that we may rise to some form of new life. That's the long arc of a holy Lent, beginning with our Ash Wednesday 'remembrance that we are dust, and to dust we shall return,' in preparation for our Easter acclamation that we are risen with Christ—yes, 'risen indeed!

On the other side of that Lenten journey we too might experience being in Ezekiel's valley of dry bones and hearing a prophetic voice call out, "Mortal, can these bones live?"—to which we might be able to respond, "O Lord God, you know" (Ezekiel 37:3).

On the other side of that Lenten journey we too might experience what today's Psalm calls the mercy of the Lord where "there is plenteous redemption" (Ps. 130:7)—plenteous redemption for me, surviving a near fatal car crash, and plenteous redemption for you, in whatever Lenten path you are sojourning on with our Lord.

Whatever that path may be, may we too hear that voice of our Lord commanding as he says in today's gospel, "Lazarus, come out!"—come out of that prison of captivity to whatever powers has us in its grip. May we too experience the gracious voice and power of God enabling the command to 'unbind us, and let us go!' (John 11:43-44)

In the name of God: "Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend." Amen.

—*The Hymnal*, no. 388, "O Worship the King," v.5

[\[1\]](#) Consider the standard list of practices and behaviors we typically renounce during Lent: addictions, compulsions, attachments, and obsessions; fault-finding or excesses of emotion whether anger or fear, or doubt or guilt.