It’s one of those Sunday’s where we need to start with a little poetry because I know that is why you come here. And today it is not just any poet but the great Anglican clergyman John Donne who tells us, “Therefore, send not to know For whom the bell tolls, It tolls for thee.” Part of the context of the poem is to remind us of the interconnectedness among humanity but it is also reminding us that death is not optional no matter our status, occupation or net worth – we all die. And because of this great leveling in dying it is one of the most thought about and feared topics in life because it only happens once and it happens to all of us. And unless you are hanging out at one of Arthur Conan Doyle’s seances people don’t come back and tell us what happens on the other side. It is the great unknown. And so, I thought in an effort to cheer everyone up I would preach about death this morning. I was thinking we might even incorporate it into a new slogan for St John Chrysostom, something along the lines of: come for the poetry stay for the death. But in all seriousness, I promise it will not be depressing because as St. Paul tells us we are not as those, “who have no hope.” So to see how we get to the happy place that Paul describes let’s start with the passage we have today from the Wisdom of Solomon and examine how it informs our understanding and belief about life and death. It partly says, “God did not make death, And he does not delight in the death of the living. For he created all things so that they might exist; the generative forces of the world are wholesome, and there is no destructive poison in them, and the dominion of Hades is not on earth. For righteousness is immortal.”

There are quite a few things to look at so let’s start with the line “God did not make death.” You could spend a lot of ink on this but I’ll be brief. The argument being made here is that God creates things, He does not destroy things. If you remember back to the book of Genesis after God did some creative act, he would sort of stand back and see that it was good. Now if God is good (which he is) he could not destroy anything that was good because that would not be good but rather it would be evil. In fact, St. Augustine’s entire definition of evil is that it is the destruction of the good. So, if we were created good but die something must have happened to allow for this reality. In the second part of this reading, we get the answer to what has happened to allow for something that was created good to be destroyed. And that answer says, “but through the devil’s envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it.” So, to recap, if Satan is, as we say in Holy Baptism a member of the group of, “all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God”, then he is the one who introduced death to the world. Because if evil is the destruction of the good the only thing Satan has at his disposal is the killing off of good things. Evil has no material in and of itself but only exists for the moments in which something good is killed. And this killing of the good can be taken both literally and figuratively. It can certainly be a physical death but it can also be those moments where we don’t do what is right and instead follow the will of Satan. We kill off the good when we choose to follow that which is wrong.

And so, if that is the reality of the world that through Satan and our ensuing disobedience death has entered the world, why do we say that we have hope? Why in a few moments during the Nicene Creed will we say, “We look for the resurrection of the dead?” Well, there is the catchall answer that works in church which is to simply say “Jesus.” And that is true but the beginning of that story is apparent in today’s reading from the Wisdom of Solomon which, in part, says, “those who belong to [the Devil’s] company experience it.” The “it” here is death. This means that we have two possible pathways in this life -- a way of life, which is for those who follow God and a way of death for those who follow Satan.

And while we have probably all heard phrases similar to this, I am not sure we always fully understand what it means. And the reason I say is because we have been given false images by TV, the movies and the Greek philosopher Plato. Let me explain what I mean. Plato argued that the soul was immortal. Meaning, come what may our soul will always be around. This is also the sort of metaphysics that is apparent on most TV shows and movies. Which is after a person dies a ghostly version of them pops out of the body and then stands around like Obi Wan and Annakin Skywalker at the end of *Return of the Jedi*. But that is not the vision we are offered today. Today’s vision is pretty comfortable with total annihilation or nothingness. That is when we die if we have pursued Satan and his ways we are no more in body or in spirit or whatever you want to call it. Yes, maybe we get poked with pitchforks for a while and are forced to listen to Barry Manilow but it eventually all ends. Now some would dispute this version of hell but regardless the important thing it points out is that only God can create life and only God can sustain life. So, when we talk about the resurrection of the dead it is not something that we have the power to do in and of ourselves but something that can only be done in cooperation with God and through God’s power. God’s power not our own is what allows for eternal life.

Here is a little architectural trivia for you (to go along with the trivia in the bulletin). Many churches have ceilings that look like the hull of a boat. I am not a nautical engineer but I am pretty sure that our ceiling is not one of them because it looks a little steep. But the reason why some churches do this is for the symbolism – the church is the ark (the one Noah was on not the one Indian Jones stole from the Nazis). Like Noah’s Ark the Church is the thing to which we cling so that we will not be washed away and destroyed by the power of Satan like those we hear about today. God gave us the church so that we could participate in the original plan. The plan where there was no pain or death. Like the ark brought Noah, his family and the animals safely through the destruction of the world the church can bring us safely through the powers of death. Not because of anything we do but because God has given it to us as the way to escape the corruption of this world. Remember the words of Jesus when he said, “on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.”

And while I know this distinction between the way in which eternal life is achieved may seem a little esoteric but it has real life consequences. If we think of it as something which we can achieve ourselves or by default, then we will be free to ignore God. But if we realize that it is a gift and a gift that is housed in God’s church then we must be like Odysseus and lash ourselves to the mast of this ship, so that we may not be plunged into death, the death that comes to all of those who are not in the company of God. Death is not the final word for those who believe in God and walk in his ways and delight in his will but rather life eternal. May it be so for us this day and forevermore.