

DYING AND LIVING

We usually follow the revised common lectionary, which is on a three year cycle. Advent begins the church year, and we will be in year C, starting next Sunday. According to Jewish writings, following a schedule dates back to Moses' time, and the early church also often adhered to appointed Scripture readings each Sunday. This practice helps to avoid a "broken record" of themes, and makes sure key passages are addressed at least once every three years.

Generally, we tend to forget lessons learned, unless periodically reminded.

I preached a sermon on Memorial Sunday in 2005 that addressed some issues we rarely examine. The sermon was titled, "Death and Dying". We have our assumptions and hope about death and the "what next", yet we are inclined to not explore them.

Since, today's theme invites the topic and we could use reminding, I decided to resurrect my sermon on death and dying.

I've revisited it, and made a few adjustments to it.

Death and dying is difficult and uncomfortable to talk about, yet death is something we must all face; we don't have a choice, and preparation helps, even though we don't get to practice.

Given our druthers, we would probably wish to die quickly or quietly at night in our sleep. But,.... that's NOT usually how it goes. Most people don't die quickly and easily. Thus, I think it is appropriate, periodically, to face the reality of death and dying.

We are infatuated with death, and we are frightened by it.

I Googled "Songs about death", and over 600 million sites were listed. I didn't read all of them, but it did expose how significant the fascination is, even though uncomfortable.

Death is one of the 3 biggest challenges we will likely face in life.

The three are: birth, parenting and death. And interestingly, none of the three require formal training or prior experience.

All of us have had some exposure to death; we know someone who has died.

I've had a lot of exposure to death, most were in the roll of being a pastor, but there were others, too.

When I was young, I experienced a seven year old friend of mine who died in a canoe accident, and my grandparents passing. I felt the loss and the void, but for the most part, my youth insulated me from feeling any deep sense of what death was about. I was young. Death rarely is an issue for the young,....fortunately.

For me, It became more profound at age 35, when my close friend died of cancer. His name was Hal, and I watched him slowly and painfully die, and that experience hit me hard, yet.....it didn't completely sink in. Death was still something for someone else, but for not me.

It did hit "home," when my parents died. More on that later.

Let's look for a moment at the I Thessalonians Chapter 4 text.

In verse 13, Paul stated, "But we do not want you to be uninformed..."

It is important to be informed.

In this context: Christ had promised to return and the believers in Thessalonica were focused on the Second Coming. However, "the anticipated second coming" was taking a long time, and some were beginning to die, before it happened. They were concerned about what was to become of those who died before Christ's return.

Reading on: "...you may not grieve as others do who have no hope."

Paul reassures them that death is not the end. Their grief from the loss of loved ones should be different because **there is** hope: hope that was demonstrated by Christ's resurrection – showing that death of the body is Not the end.

Continuing, and the passage is in your bulletin, if you want to follow along.

Verse 15: "For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord."

The teachings / the lessons of Christ are passed down from Believer to Believer, and it is through this "Passing of the Word" that the hope and support grows and continues.

16 starts: "For the Lord himself..." – it goes on to present a promise of assurance, and verse 17 are words of encouragement.

18: "Therefore, encourage one another with these words."

In essence, don't turn to fear. Worry and anxiety should be set aside. *It will be okay.*

Paul's intent was to comfort and affirm the hope in life after death.

His examples for hope were appropriate for the people at that time.

A **bodily resurrection** was deeply entrenched in their belief system, and hearing that it would still happen meant a lot to them.

The particulars of that prediction is pretty well meaningless for me. Personally, I have no interest or need thinking there is a bodily resurrection. Nevertheless, many people, even today, cling to old predictions of what will happen to our human body.

For centuries, the Church held to that belief. Heretics were burned, destroying the body, in order that there would be no way possible for their body to resurrected,in case they were not really guilty.

In the early days of the established church, people of a community would place a large tombstone over the grave of tyrants and ruthless leaders, thinking the sheer weight of the stone would hold their body down.

Years later, people came to believe that the large tombstone was chosen as an honour, and so large fancy tombstones became a custom for the graves of the rich and powerful.

Perceptions/ beliefs change over time, and regardless of what we believe about a bodily resurrection, it is mere speculation.

It really does not impact the bigger issue– our next life!

Besides, focussing on the *details of what next*..... is missing the point.

Yet, amazingly, there are people who predict the “end of time”, and many claim to know what will happen “next.”

Apparently they are smarter than Jesus was, because He said in Mark 13:32, that he didn’t even know such details.

We can get so hung up about trying to know / trying to Own the details. I suppose it is an effort to control what happens next.

However, we can get so wrapped up with death and beyond that we neglect to live,..... and... we miss what is truly important....which is the love and grace of God.

People argue about the details of what's next... and who's in and who's out.

Claiming a ticket to heaven, for some, seems to be more important than following the way of Christ / of being in a right relationship with God. It seems like they are cashing in Jesus like a golden pass.

I recently heard someone say, "Jesus died to save us."

Really?

I like to think that Jesus LIVED to bring us salvation ...to show us the way to live.

Yet,..... we dwell on what we can't control.... and what frightens us, and that is a sad way to be.

The "how," "when" and "what next" are unknown to me. I think literally interpreting the passages about the rapture and the images about heaven can cause us to focus on the wrong things, and..that can be hazardous to our faith development....and how we live.

Paul didn't know the "when" and "how" any more than I do. He thought it would come during the lifetimes of those to whom he was writing.

The Hope in the hereafter is a prominent theme in the New Testament. We can find some comfort through countless promises by Jesus. One such example is his statement in John 14 where he assuages us to “not worry” and that God is preparing a place for us.

And, our hope rests not on the details, but on knowing/experiencing the love and grace of God.

However, trying to describe the life after this life / claiming to know how things will be after death is .. Simply vain speculation.

It is just vain speculation.
We can dream and wonder, but we don't know.

I don't know the details, but here is my best analogy for death, and it explains why it is impossible to know or have a clear picture:

I think death is in many ways like a baby's birth: **it is radical; it is entering into a very, very new environment** just like leaving a dark womb and being pushed into a bright new world. The soon to be born baby has no idea what is next, and we cannot prepare or forewarn the baby about what to expect. The baby is much too limited to receive and comprehend such guidance. Therefore, the change is radically new and different.

**I don't think we can comprehend anything about the next realm.*

Moreover, the Baby being born has no choice; the baby, whether she wants to or not, is forced to leave the womb. Death is similar.

I believe that going into the next domain is as extreme a change as a baby coming into this domain....we call *life*. Before birth, a baby is warm, snug, and fed. She is in the familiar – home, and then everything changes, and I imagine there is pain for the baby with all that pushing and transition going on..... and suddenly..... there is a whole new world with lights and all sorts of new sensations.....

But, note and remember this: It is intended that ..the new born baby is cradled and lovingly received in the new domain, and is nurtured and cared for..... until understanding is possible, and..... the love continues, too. This is important to remember.

I think death is like that..... We don't have a choice. The process normally is unpleasant, and we will enter into a realm that is far beyond our ability to understand, and I think all images and predictions about heaven are just speculation.....AND... that sounds scary!
But remember, like a new born baby, we will be received with amazing Love. Because God is there, too, and God is love.

We will be received with amazing love..... it will be okay!

It will be **more** than okay! Our experience after this life will be good, very good. We take that on faith.

That is our hope, and that is all we have.

I think, needing to know the details reveals a need to be in control, and that need can be a big hindrance to facing death.

Anyone who tells you what heaven is like is merely guessing.
Biblical images are a symbolic way of saying "it will be good, very good."

Having a picture of the "here after" is like choosing a venue for where we are going **next**. **as if we have such control.**

**The truth is: WE ARE TOTALLY HELPLESS. And, knowing that helplessness will help us face death.

Letting go of “control” will likely be our last great lesson learned in this life! Unless we die suddenly, letting go of control will be OUR moment of Zen.
Perhaps, we can learn this lesson..... sooner! If we do, we will grow in faith, ...death will be a lot easier to face and life will be better, too.

DEATH

Death, the process, for most of us..... will NOT be fun.
Few die quickly; most deaths are a long arduous struggle– life clings to life. Death is much more intense than pushing a baby out of the womb. And,..helpful lessons can be learned in the death process.

Some people are ready for death. For most people, it seems, the dying process is preparation for letting go.

I’ve noticed, that if the dying person is still alert, at a certain point he/she will acquire a sense of detachment from this world, and a new set of values will emerge.

A dying person cares little about the hot button issues.

The passion is on living, and that new focus is an example of learning to let go.

The death process..... forces a person to let go of control, and it CAN include the transition to a new way of thinking/ being. This transition can be hard, and it is sometimes laden with torment, doubt and fear.

In addition, there are physical changes that happen in dying:

The dying person’s hands, arms and feet and then legs may be increasingly cool to the touch, and at the same time the color of the skin changes.

Sleep often increases and disorientation is common: less oxygen is reaching the brain and metabolism is changing.

And keep this in mind: Even if a dying person is unresponsive, be sensitive to what you say in his presence. He may still be able to hear and understand.

There are other common, physical symptoms in the death process, such as restlessness, decreased to no appetite and thirst, and congestion with gurgling sounds that at times can be loud. It is not a pretty process.

Dying is a profound occasion.

I encourage loved ones **to**, before the final moments when death is close, to talk from the heart with the dying person: say those important things, and say Good-bye!

“Good-bye” may be difficult to say, but even so, if you have the chance..... say it while it can be received! Saying "good-bye" and commenting that loved ones will be okay,.... can give a dying person permission to let go / to die.

And, if it is too late to say "Good-bye", then for yourself, say it anyways.

When my father was in his last days..... I was given the burden, thanks to a cowardly doctor, to inform him that he was going to die.

Not fully grasping the situation, I put my pastor hat on, and told him in a concise, restrained manner. His eyes displayed his surprise and dismay. The tubes and his dry mouth prevented him from talking. He tried to write, but could no longer do that either.

I did the talking and the comforting.

How very strange and unnatural that felt for me, the son,and my pastor hat of professional detachment slipped away.

The next day with him, was very different. The reality had set in and his own preparation had begun.... and I was more the witness, and less the son.

A few days later, I fully lost my father, and I lost part of my shield from death.

It took two more years for Alzheimer’s disease to claim my mother.

Even though rational thought had long ago abandoned her, she forestalled her own death until I arrived. She held onto life’s thinnest thread for three days, until I could be there.

Both my sister and brother knew that she would not die until I was there..... She liked me best.

Her soul left this earth while I was holding her head. She brought me into this world, and I was there as she went out,..... and that reality was very profound for me.

A week or so later, while I was driving my car, an old song played on the radio. As I listened to that song, I clearly remembered the day in 1958 when I was with my sister as she purchased the 45 rpm single of that song.

Then it **hit me to the core.** That 40 year old recollection was as clear as could be, AS IF IT HAPPENED YESTERDAY.

And, in a flash, today will be just the same-- the rest of my life will disappear in a flash, and I will likely be in a hospital bed suffering from septic shock.

There will be fever, rapid pulse and respiratory distress. I will experience CT scans, ultrasounds X-rays, and numerous blood tests.

IVs will be given for various reasons, and I will be connected to numerous wires and tubes.

Before long, If I can still organize my thoughts, I will notice a sudden decrease in medical activity; doctors and staff will become calmer as they slowly separate themselves from the person they were trying to save.

I may be taken home, and I will notice that my loved ones have acquired sullen faces, and they keep coming up to me..... saying the same awkward things.

It hit me..... my death..... I am going to die! Life is very short!

Death will happen to each of us..... and we have **NO** control over death, and it is something we do ALONE. No other living person will be able to walk through to the other side with us.

I don't know what happens with our spirit when we die.

I do believe that judgement waits until the "end of all time."
Our death does not bring about the final judgement.

I don't know what happens to the spirit after it leaves the body. I can only guess.

Before someone dies, *given the opportunity*, I will talk about letting go and receiving God's love, and that the next phase of experience will be good.

And, if I'm there when a person dies, depending on circumstances and my intuition, I will ask to be alone with the body, and I will speak out loud in the room, saying words of comfort and assurance, and that a very loving God is waiting.

I don't know if the person's spirit is present and listening or NOT, ...But, I have sensed that it was the right thing for me to do. ????

I don't know..... I don't try to explain those things.

What does matter is that we understand the following:

that death will happen, we are NOT in control;

that the living survivors, as we call them, will be alright—life goes on, and that our future will be just fine,.... unless we blatantly and persistently reject love / God.

Each of us will die..... some sooner than we think, and some later.

And, the details of what happens next are really beyond us..... the citations in the Bible are to give hope and comfort.

The clear and strong Biblical message on death has three parts:

One -- Be prepared..... which includes facing the reality of death, and obviously denotes preparing our soul for our existence with God, beyond this life—living in love!

Two – That those who choose God don't need to worry about the afterlife. It will be good: God is there, and we will be received with love.

And Three – !! Don't overlook this life / your life.

It matters how you live – enjoy, engage, do life. Do NOT live in fear, and don't waste life! Don't worry about petty things, such as whether another person alternative lifestyle right or wrong, or what to wear, etc..

Don't waste life.

I think the three saddest words are “I should have.”

It is time for the breathing to live / to love.

Death will happen, and facing death will change your life.

Facing death will change your life.

Don't put that change off until the end.