

All Saints Service of Remembrance and Hope

Nov. 1, 2015, 5:00 p.m.

Pastor Deb Birkeland

Isaiah 25: 6-9 | Phillippians 3:20-4:1 | Revelation 21: 1-6a

Grace to you and peace on this All Saints Day!
May you know the presence and power of our Lord of Love
and Life as we worship together tonight. Amen.

On All Saints Day we pause and remember the gift of our loved ones, who in Christ can never be lost. It is a day of remembrance and hope, as we proclaim a resurrection like our Lord's, and eternal life that shouts victory over the stones of death.

In our home, I have bookshelves filled with photo albums, that capture memories with friends and family. One of the joys of being a grandmother, is to watch as my loved ones spend time flipping through old albums and remembering. It says to me that life is precious and is often measured in the memories of love and aliveness that we share on this earth. When people pause to remember, they cherish that part of life that can never be wrenched away, the love and adventure of being a child of God wrapped up in the arms of family. That's why grieving is so hard, and so important. We grieve what we cherish, what has brought joy and aliveness into our being. Grieving is a gift, for it opens us to a healing that can absorb grace and love more deeply.

In the book many in our congregation are reading, We Make the Road by Walking, by Brian McClaren, the author speaks about the end of human life when the Spirit of life calls us home. Let me share some of his insights with you tonight. (pg. 250) McClaren writes:

"So what might we expect to happen when we die? Nobody knows for sure, but in light of Jesus' death and resurrection, we can expect to experience death as a passage, like birth, the end of one life stage and the beginning of another. We

don't know how that passage will come...[but] However it happens, we can expect to discover that were not falling out of life, but deeper into it."

What an amazing thought...that we don't fall out of life, but deeper into life...a life with God that is even more alive than what we can know in mortal flesh. McClaren continues: *"On the other side, we can expect to experience as never before the unimaginable light or energy of God's presence. We will enter into a goodness so good, a richness so rich, a holiness so holy, a mercy and love so strong and true that all our evil, pride, lust, greed resentment, and fear will be instantly melted out of us. We will at that moment more fully understand how much we have been forgiven...and we will be filled with love...love for God and love for everyone and everything that has, like us been forgiven....We can expect to feel a limitless sense of Ah yes, now I see!"*

But, there is more... *"We can (also) expect to feel a sense of reunion with loved ones that have died, but also with great-great-grandparents and our second cousins a thousand times removed whose names we have never known but to whom we are in fact related. That sense of relatedness that we know with closest of kin will somehow be expanded to every person who has ever lived. And that sense of relatedness won't stop with human beings, but will expand infinitely outward to all of God's creation....And we can also expect to feel differently about our sufferings...What has been suffered or lost will feel weightless compared to the substance that has been gained....we can expect to wake up to an explosion of pure, utter gratitude as we suddenly and fully realize all we've had and taken for granted all along."*

We might wonder how McClaren or anyone could assert thoughts about death and resurrection with such boldness. And yet, scripture envisions this kind of scene of completion and glory over and over again. When we allow God's Spirit to prepare us for dying through the power of God's word and the remembrance and hope of relationships bathed in grace, forgiveness and love, we lose fear, because the flow of our lives will be in harmony with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Yet, the jolt...finality...ugliness of death is not an easy thing to understand from our human point of view. Generations ago, most people died at home and people had a much more hands-on experience with the end stages of human life. But then we moved into a time where hospitals and the medical community became the primary presence at a time of death, and death was set apart from living. Now, with the emergence of hospice and Palliative Care, that sacred ground of dying is once more accessible to the family and loved ones if death doesn't come unexpectedly, and I believe this is a very good thing. Why? Because from scripture's point of view, death is just another life passage, much like birth, in which we move from one plain of reality into another. The Psalmist writes that even as we are being knit together in our mother's womb, we are known. Before our very birth, we were with God, and in our life on earth, as well as our passage through death, we are with God as well. Where could I go to flee from your presence, cries the psalmist. You know me so well that you know my going out and coming in. You are so familiar with all my ways that not a word is on my tongue but you, O God, know what I will say. No matter where I go, or what happens to me, your Spirit is with me...even to the farthest reaches of the world, or the darkest of valleys. Our night is as light to our God. Our days...every single day...is ordained; planned; and unfolded. We all shall die, but when we awake, we are with God, just as we have always been.

This Psalm gives great comfort. But it isn't the only place in scripture where our God paints a picture of His abiding, life-giving presence that swallows up death; wipes away our tears and won't let us go. Isaiah's vision of the mountain of the Lord where all God's people find rich food and abundant life beyond the confines of this world echo a truth that we as Christians know to be revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. On this very mountain, the mountain of victory, the shroud of death that is cast over all humanity and all nations is lifted, and disgrace is to be taken away from the earth. Soon, we will be reading the wonderful text from the Book of Revelation that continues this vision of glory as a new heaven and a new earth emerge and God makes all things new!

Often, I have shared these Biblical images of hope and power with someone facing death. They always bring comfort and peace. And yet, death has a sting that is hard to face...it has the sting of sorrow; grief beyond our imagination; separation that is more final than our human perception can resolve; and often, things left undone, unsaid, incomplete. Death, while often a peaceful passage, can also be a very hard place. Even Jesus wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, knowing full well the abundant and fully new life that lay ahead. Grief is hard...very hard.

And that is why I felt compelled this summer to attend a seminar offered by death and dying expert David Kessler on the needs of the dying. I had expected those 8 hours to be heavy and draining, but instead, they were filled with hope; good news; and tenderness. I came away seeing death through a new lens, and my role...as well as the role of all who stand by a loved one in their final hours, as a sacred opportunity and privilege.

I learned that the dying process is so much harder for those of us watching and waiting, than it is for the person moving through this moment of passage into their new life with God. Like a mother and her unborn child's bodies prepare for birth, yes, there are labor pains and moments that feel a bit scary, but when the moment is right, and that baby is born, joy takes over. Life is stronger than the discomfort or fear of the unknown. And Love floods forth bonding mother, father and child in a new beginning.

So it can be at the time of death. The human body is shielded from the harshness and the soul is prepared to leave its earthly tent. David Kessler, who has worked with death and dying for over 30 years, many of them under the mentorship of Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, who taught us about the five stages of grief and helped begin the hospice movement, shared a statistic that I had not heard before. He said that 80% of us will have a death-bed vision in our final moments on earth. We may see a loved one coming to guide us home, or bring assurance that all will be all right. Or, we may have a crowd, literally a cloud of witnesses...surrounding us with welcome and joy. Or, we may feel ourselves being prepared for

a journey...one that is inviting and compelling. I was having a hard time believing what I was hearing until Dr. Kessler, who was speaking to room filled with both hospice nurses, Dr's and chaplains, asked everyone who had personally witnessed a person experiencing a death bed vision to raise their hand. Nearly every hand in the room went up!

Since that day last summer, I have found myself reading both scripture, and trustworthy literature addressing this subject of the process of dying. Let me share one real-life experience shared by a hospice nurse from her book, One Foot in Heaven.) Heidi Telpner, RN.

From a story about an elderly man whom she was attending at the time of his passing, the hospice nurse said this:

Suddenly, with his good hand, Mr. Blum pointed to the wall by the foot of the bed. "Can you see it?" He asked, his eyes wide open. "See what?" I asked. "The meadow," he replied, "the colors. Can you see them? Can you see how splendid they are?" I turned and gazed at the wall. It was a big undecorated plain white wall. But, I could feel a glow like sunshine on my face. "Is it heaven?" he asked in a small voice, sounding very much like a little boy. "Yes," I assured him, "It's heaven."

Suddenly he sat forward, both arms outstretched, even his paralyzed right arm. His face shone with joy. "What do you see?" I asked him. "My wife is coming," he answered. "She's coming across the meadow." "Do you want to go with her?" I asked. "Yes," he replied...My arm still around his shoulders, Mr. Blum closed his eyes and died. A sense of peace descended upon the entire house. Tears squeezed out between my closed eyelids as I sat silently...just holding him." (p. 142)

I know stories like these may seem fanciful. And I know that peaceful, loving moments of death aren't always the norm. Sometimes a loved one is taken suddenly, without warning. Sometimes it may seem to us he or she is suffering terribly, and that makes the reality even more difficult to bear. But I would like to assure you of one thing...GOD IS WITH US...ALWAYS...AND ESPECIALLY AS WE MOVE FROM THIS LIFE TO OUR ETERNAL HOME, NO MATTER OUR CIRCUMSTANCE OF DEATH AND DYING. "Lo, I am with you," Jesus promised, "even unto the end of the age." Jesus is with us as a people, but also as individuals. "Come onto me all who are weary," he promises, and I will give you rest. For my yoke is lighter than the burdens of this world, and easier to bear." And from those wonderful promises recorded in the gospel of John, Jesus promises this...."Believe in God believe also in me...for I go to prepare a place for you and will come back to bring you to myself, that where I am you also may be!"

The Bible is literally filled with promises like this! Whether in the words of the Old Testament prophets who spoke God's truth to a people devastated by exile and sin with little or no hope of ever knowing home again; or disciples who would soon witness the most cruel, inhuman form of crucifixion upon the very Son of God; to the writer of a coded book written to new Christians facing cruel oppressors in Rome. Promises and visions of a new thing...a new life...a new kingdom where God and morals dwell together; where death and sorrow are no more; where weeping lasts the night, but joy comes in the morning...these promises are what sustain us and give us faith! Together, as people of a living God...a very present help in trouble; the one for whom our soul thirsts; the one who speaks and the mountains crumble and wars cease, yet who calls to us in stillness and love; THIS is the one whose promises we can trust! Even now...even while we say good-bye to our own saint...or own loved one. And even as we live day by day knowing that mortal death awaits us all.

From Psalm 118 we hear these amazing words of promise:

"Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.

This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.

I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it." Psalm 118: 19-24

And so, on this All Saints day...in the quiet of this sacred worship space. And, in the presence of one another, we gather our hearts, our tears, our hopes and our love. For we have been given a vision of what is to come that surely sustains and upholds us. For our God is a God of promises that NEVER fail. His word is secure. His truth is stronger than our ability to understand reality. And, his love endureth forever and is stronger than death.

As you come forward tonight to light a candle in remembrance of your loved ones now with God, AND, as you bring your prayers for healing and hope for yourselves or those you love, may you know that NOTHING...NOTHING....ABSOLUTELY NOTHING, CAN SEPARATE YOU FROM THE LOVING PRESENCE OF CHRIST. For our CITIZENSHIP IS IN HEAVEN, and it is from heaven that God turns our mourning into joy and allows us to glimpse a future where ALL THINGS ARE NEW!

God's richest blessings upon each of you tonight and always. Amen.