

Sermon 032215 Death  
Scripture Psalm 39, John 12: 20-33  
Sermon Title- Death or Life?

Those dozen or so of you who attended the brief evening service on Ash Wednesday may recall that I spoke of Lent being a time to contemplate our sinfulness and death. A few weeks ago, we heard the Ten Commandments read from the book of Exodus and I preached on them. We've been working on sin and now as we are on the approach to Good Friday, I'd like to spend sometime on death.

As a pastor, death is something I spend a lot of time on. I have been present when death arrived a few times. I have had conversations with folks about death, specifically their death. I have planned people's funerals with them. I have comforted grieving loved ones and done over a hundred funerals. I've also given some family eulogies. Yes, death is the life event I deal with the most in my ministry.

You would think that Christians would be fairly consistent in their thinking on death, but they are not. The most common notion is the existential but untested notion of immortality. Though death has been around for as long as we have and doubtless will be here after we are gone, as a group Christians have not yet become comfortable with death.

Death is the universal destiny for all of us, the high and the low, the bright and the dull, the rich and the poor, the good and the bad. Death evokes a sense of awe and even primal fear. It is our link to our ancestors all the way back to the caves and the trees.

Death disturbs us and when anything disturbs us in the Western world we design complex ways of isolating it, sterilizing it, and make it clinical. We speak of death in whispers and try to avoid any encounter with its grim realities. All this makes death a perfect topic for a sermon in Lent.

In one of the best books ever written on death, *On Death and Dying*, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross raises the tone of the discussion and is infinitely wise in forcing us to take the cosmetics off of death and dying. She shows that sentiment and fear have denied us hope and dignity in death. Strangely enough, the leadership in bringing new attitudes toward death is not coming from the church but the social and medical sciences. This includes all the discussions about advanced directives and such. Advance directives are documents instructing medical people what to do regarding things like life support procedures when life is not over but quality of life is.

When I was at West Church, I did an adult education program on end of life issues. We covered everything from advance directives to wills to what folks wanted at their funerals.

In the recent Union Church survey, there was enough interest in a program like that here that I will plan to do it. Let me get through Stephan Ministry training first, though.

So, let us turn to the Christian gospel in order to see what it teaches us about death. In one of the biggest ideas in the Christian gospel along with how to live good lives and avoid living bad lives, is the gospel's radical idea about death. In Jesus Christ we see that death is not the end, that death itself is conquered. We can share new life in Christ because Christ has conquered death. What am I saying when I say that Christ has conquered death? Although innocent, Jesus was tortured and killed. Three days later, he rose from the dead, thereby showing that there is life after death. The Resurrection teaches us that there is life eternal after death for all of us in Jesus Christ.

Rather than avoid death, the Christian can accept it and confront it. In Christ, we can see death as a comma instead of a period. That is the good news, the gospel's revolutionary attitude toward death, and it is the essential ingredient of the Christian message. Through his resurrection, Christ has overcome the enemy of death.

Now if you had known this was going to be an Easter sermon you would have bought new clothes and done it up right. By the way, the reason we worship on Sundays instead of Saturdays as it

is written in the Ten Commandments is that Sunday is the day of Resurrection. Every Sunday is a reminder of Easter for Christians. So yes, speaking of Easter in a Lenten sermon on death is entirely appropriate.

For Christians to ignore death or pretend it doesn't exist is the Christian ignoring the unique promise we share in Christ. This promise we not only share in Christ, but with all the men and women who have been his followers for the last 20 centuries. It makes us one.

The quality of our living is largely determined by our attitudes toward death. Not everyone I've spoken with about death is afraid to die, but among those who are afraid to die, the most common theme is this. People aren't necessarily afraid of the dying process or what happens after you die. They are afraid to die not having made an impact in this world. People want to live a life that matters. So, our view on death depends upon how we live our lives and our view of life depends upon our view of death.

It is entirely appropriate for us to be reminded of our mortality. When I applied ashes on the foreheads to the hearty few who were here on Ash Wednesday, I said, "Remember thou are dust and to dust thou shall return." To dust thou shall return is the reminder of death, and decomposing and returning to dust. It is not a happy thought but an appropriate one.

The fear of death contributes to the idolatry of life. There are people who want to be kept alive indefinitely in some vegetative state with the hope that there might be a miracle breakthrough that could get them whole. Also, part of the idolatry of life comes for people who have grieved the death of a loved one. Death is so painful for the living it becomes something to avoid at any cost. That is a reason that people avoid thinking about death. They have experienced the grief of losing a loved one. What they forget is when their own death comes, they will not be the grieving one.

The late great computer genius Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple Corporation once said, “Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking that you’ve got something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart.”

The church has always taken on even in a militant way the demonic forces of darkness, selfishness, and oppression. That is a big part of the church’s job. But we also fight against the idea of death that denies us joy in this life and hope in the next.

It is Christ who liberates us from that bondage through his triumph over the grave. It is Christ who sets us free from the fear and corruption of death. It is in the cosmic encounter with Christ in death that we are brought together with him through newness of life.

The Reverend John Donne in his great poem *Death* gets it right: “One short sleep past, we wake eternally, and death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.”

I heard a discussion on a radio talk show recently. The hosts asked the question, “If you knew you had a short time to live, what would you do?” I didn’t call in but my thought was, well, we should all be living our lives like our days are numbered because they are. If you want to die well; live well. The way to live a life that matters is to make each day matter. The way to make each day matter is to live each day in the ways of the Lord. We therefore rejoice with those who have run their course, and we pray now for strength to run our own. AMEN