

“Living Courageously in the Face of Death”

Date: November 1, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: 1 Cor. 15:50-57; John 11:17-26 Theme: Death, fear, faith

Occasion: Unafraid series, All Saints Day

Death looms large in the life of a pastor. I have officiated at 365 funerals in my 34 years of ministry. I've done funerals for still-born children, for persons who lived to be over 100 years old, and for hundreds of people in between. I've officiated at the funeral of a parishioner's mother who was murdered and for a parishioner who committed suicide. Just this week I was honored to conduct the funeral for the mother of one of our members.

Death is a regular part of my ministry as a pastor because death is a regular part of life. Sometimes death takes a long time in coming and the person suffers for years. Then, death comes as a relief. Other times death comes suddenly and unexpectedly, like an unwanted guest.

None of us knows *when* our death will happen, nor do we know *how* it will happen. But we all know *it will* happen. Death is our common end as a human being. As we ponder our own passing, it is natural to feel *some* worry, fear or anxiety. It means our brain's early warning system is doing its job. Fear is our body's way of warning us of an impending threat.

For many people, anxiety about death has less to do with the act of dying itself, and more to do with anticipating the grief of no longer being with loved ones. In either case, whether we are anxious about dying, or simply afraid of being separated from our loved ones, we must come to terms with death.

On this All Saints Day, as we celebrate the lives of those who have died this year, we want to try and answer this question. How do we live life

well, knowing that death is our common end and could come at any time? How can we face each day without fear, but instead with courage & hope?

Agnostics, atheists and other world religions each offer various answers about what happens to us after we die. I'll leave it to you to explore those other options if you'd like. But this morning I'd like to explore the answers that the Christian faith brings to these questions about death, dying and the afterlife.

Let's start with the basics. Christians believe there is more to human beings than our physical body. In 2 Corinthians 4:7 Paul describes our bodies as *clay pots*. In his day, clay pots were common earthen vessels for holding food and water. They could easily break; they wouldn't last forever.

Paul makes this comparison not to disparage our bodies but to remind us they aren't intended to last forever. The body is like a clay pot; it's fragile; it breaks; it doesn't last forever. But our essential self is a treasure. (2 Corinthians 4:7)

Another passage that captures this difference between the physical body and our essential self is 2 Cor. 4:16-18. "So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary but what cannot be seen is eternal."

For many people, it is this hope, that our soul lives on after the physical body dies, that gives them strength for living, even in the face of death. They may still feel the physical and emotional fear which comes from the part of the brain that warns us of physical danger, but they are not controlled by that fear. They continue to live, unafraid.

How is it, though, that our essential self continues when the brain, which seems to serve as our hard drive and central processing unit, no longer lives? How does such a transfer from our physical body, to whatever spiritual body God has prepared for us, actually occur?

I don't know. But how about a metaphor, to try to explain it? Many of you own smart phones. If you upgrade to a new phone, what happens to all of the data on your old phone? Does it simply go away? No, because all of your messages, photographs and so forth have been stored "in the cloud." When you get your new phone, all of that data has been transferred to the new phone.

How does it happen? I don't know, but it's there. To me it's a mystery; but I gladly accept it. In 1 Cor. 15 Paul says that "we will all be changed," as we leave this earthly body behind and receive a new spiritual body. The New Testament teaches that our new spiritual body will not be subject to illness or death, and no one will cry or mourn any more.

Paul sees death *not* as a defeat, but as a *victory*. I love the message by Natalie Sleeth in her song "Hymn of Promise."

"In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;  
In our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity,  
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,  
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see."

The Christian idea, that you are more than simply electrical impulses that flash across your brain, and that you survive death, receiving an imperishable body, seems absurd to some people. But to many people, myself included, it seems quite acceptable because of what Jesus said about death, and because of the Gospel accounts of his resurrection.

In John 11 Jesus receives word that his good friend Lazarus has died

By the time Jesus gets to the village of Bethany to meet with the deceased's family, Lazarus has been in the grave several days. When the dead man's sister, Martha meets the Lord, she says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died."

In response, Jesus says to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

Then, on the night before his death, Jesus spoke to his disciples about what was about to happen. Seeing their confused and troubled expressions, he said, "Don't be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. My Father's house has room to spare. If that weren't the case, would I have told you that I'm going to prepare a place for you? When I go to prepare a place for you, I will return and take you to be with me, so that where I am you will be too." (John 14:1-4)

I love the image of Heaven as being God's house "*with room to spare.*" I also love to hear Jesus saying, "I will return to take you to be with me." He didn't say he'd send his angels at the time of death; he says *he himself* will come for us when we die.

Of course, none of this talk would make any difference at all if Jesus had not himself conquered death. By his own resurrection Jesus gives us the proof that his words are not empty, but can be trusted. Jesus appeared first to the women at the grave, then to the other disciples, and at one point over 500 people saw the risen Christ. Paul himself, once a persecutor of the church, had an encounter with the risen Christ.

My friends, Jesus tells us it is safe to die. It is not the end of the road. There is not only another life, there is a better life that awaits us. For me, Easter is the most important holiday of the year, for it is that holy day which

takes away our fear of death.

For Christians, faith is more than simply a set of beliefs that we have to agree upon. Faith is more than a set of expectations of how we are to live. For Christians, faith is that unshakable trust in God and the promises of God. Our faith radically and convincingly changes how we face death – our own death and the death of those we love.

And so, with the psalmist we trust that “though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me.”

I love this one prayer in our hymnal found in the Service of Death and Resurrection (p. 871).

“Help us to live as those who are prepared to die.  
And when our days here are accomplished,  
enable us to die as those who go forth to live,  
so that living or dying, our life may be in you.”

Beloved in Christ, I pray that your faith enables you to live with courage and hope, because, sickness and death come to us all. Yes, God answers prayers and there are healings. But one day, we will all end this earthly journey.

In faith, may we live courageously and with hope, so that when our loved ones are called home, or when it is our time to go home to be with Jesus, we may do so without fear. Amen.