

The Death of David

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 15th Sunday after Pentecost, September 1, 1991, at Sacred Heart Roman Catholic church. Scripture Lessons: 1 Kings 2:1-4, 10-12; Psalm 121; Ephesians 6:10-20; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Dr. D.T. Niles, a past president of the World Council of Churches and a great Minister of the Gospel, once wrote that "the heart of a religion is never laid more bare than in the way it meets death." How do you face the inevitability of your death? Are you growing in your faith? Are you fighting the good fight of faith so that you will be strong in the face of death?

We come this morning to the death of David. We've followed David's ~~life from the time he was a little boy keeping watch over his father's flocks~~ to his old age and death. Look at how David faced death. "When David's time to die drew near, he charged his son Solomon, saying: "I am about to go the way of all the earth."

He spoke of going "the way of all the earth". He was referring to the creation story where God stooped down and scooped a handful of clay from the earth, shaped it into a human being and breathed life into it. God has placed the treasure of life in earthen vessels (2 Cor. 4:7). And when we die we go ^{back to the earth. We go} the way of all the earth. "Earth to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes."

David knew that death was inevitable. It was "the way of all the earth". A human being may escape some things. We may escape poverty. We

may escape serious illness. We may escape what G.K. Chesterton called, "The splendid worry of being married." But none of us escapes death.

Time, like an ever rolling stream,
Soon bears us all away;
We fly forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day.

The heart of a religion is never laid more bare than in the way it meets death. How will we face the inevitability of death?

1. I believe that there's something within all of us that rages against death. Dylan Thomas wrote,

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Some people feel that rage in the face of death isn't appropriate for Christians. But St. Paul spoke of death as an enemy. "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death." When Jesus stood before the tomb of Lazarus, the Gospel writer tells us that he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled. The word used for "groaned" means "to be enraged". Jesus was enraged as he stood at the tomb of his friend Lazarus because he looked upon death as an enemy. I believe that it's altogether appropriate for Christians to rage against death, especially when it comes, not at the end of life, but in its midst. *To fight against death as against an enemy that threatens to destroy you & your loved ones.*

2. But there are also times when we welcome death. St. Paul wrote, "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain... I do not know which I prefer.

I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ for that is far better." Jane Austen, the English novelist, was suffering terribly just before her death in 1817. She was asked if she wanted anything. "Nothing but death," she replied.

Modern medical technology is wonderful when it's able to prolong life. But it's awful when technology is used to prolong death and dying. If you decide you don't want to be artificially sustained when your natural death is imminent, tell your doctor, talk with your loved ones. If the situation should arise in which there's no reasonable expectation of my recovery from physical or mental disability I want to die and not be kept alive by artificial means or 'heroic measures.' There are times when death is welcomed.

3. Fear is also a way ^{in most of us} which ~~many people~~ face death. Sometimes it's the fear annihilation. In one of his poems, John Donne, a devout Christian, wrote,

I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;

I have a very close friend in Harrisburg who once told me, "You know, Ted, I fear that when I die, I die and that's it." I know this man to be a faithful servant of Jesus Christ. I know he believes in "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting" and yet, from time to time, he has this fear.

Some people fear, not annihilation, but hell. Samuel Johnson's biographer, Boswell, tells us that Johnson often expressed his fear of hell. When he was assured that Christ died for his sins Johnson replied, "Yes, I know that. But I also know that our Lord once said that on the last day he would separate the sheep from the goats."

Still other Christians fear, not annihilation or hell, but they fear for their loved ones whom they will leave behind. Who will take care of the children? Will my husband or wife be able to manage? Christians aren't spared these feelings of fear and anxiety. These fears aren't incompatible with Christian faith. They're part of what it means to be fully human.

4. But, above all, a Christian faces death with a trust in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Long before Christ's resurrection the Psalmist confessed his faith,

The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul. The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.

Yea though I walk in death's dark vale,
Yet will I fear none ill;
For Thou art with me; and Thy rod
And staff me comfort still.

John Greenleaf Whittier once confessed his faith in the God we know in Jesus Christ in these words --

I know not what the future hath
Of marvel or surprise,
Assured alone that life and death,
His mercy underlies:

And so beside the Silent Sea
I wait the muffled oar;
No harm from Him can come to me

On ocean or on shore.

I know not where His islands lift
Their fringed palms in air;
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond His love and care.

One day you may find yourself raging against death. There may come a day when you welcome death. And maybe, even now, as you have been thinking about the inevitability of death, fears are being stirred up. But, in your raging, trust in the risen Christ; in your fears, trust in the Risen Christ. Trust in the One who has revealed himself in the life, death and

resurrection of Jesus Christ. *When you live out that faith through worship, love and service then when you come to lay down your*
~~Brief Statement of Faith.~~
go the way of all the earth you will be able to confess with your lips and heart

In life and in death ~~we~~ belong to God
Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
~~We~~ trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve.

With believers in every time and place,
~~We~~ rejoice that nothing in life or in death
can separate ~~us~~ ^{ME} from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let us pray: Teach us, O Lord, to live as those who are about to die; and to die as those who are about to live; so that whether we are to live or die, it may be unto you, who are the Lord of life and death. We pray this in the name of the resurrected Christ and for his sake. Amen.