



Sermons from

“The Communion of Saints”

The Rev. Dr. Fairfax F. Fair

November 6, 2011

Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Psalm 121

I Thessalonians 4:13-18

John was eighty-six. He and his beloved wife Wilma had been married for sixty-three years when she died. John continued to live in their little house on Fourth Street after her death, but the joy of living was gone.

For two years, John moped around. He ate nothing but cereal and canned soup; he stopped going to the Y to swim, and he often let several days' newspapers accumulate before going out to pick them up.

John seemed to greet his diagnosis of bladder cancer with gladness. He refused all treatment and went home to make preparations: laying out his dark suit, his newest white shirt, and the tie Wilma always liked best; and typing out – on his 1950's manual typewriter – all the details of his life that his daughter would need, the numbers that now define us all and the location of his safety deposit box.

For several months John was all right. Then his daughter, Joan, got a call; the end was near. She came from across the state to be with him at the hospital. The last few days he had not spoken. His temperature had spiked, and he clearly was uncomfortable: grimacing, groaning, and sweating.

Joan alone was in his room about 3:45 that Tuesday afternoon when his thrashing stopped. She looked over at him and saw his eyes open for the first time in two days. The pain was gone from his face, replaced by a look of adoration. His eyes focused on something Joan could not see and his voice sounded as strong and clear as she remembered from her childhood. John said, "Isn't she beautiful! My, oh my, isn't she beautiful!" Then gently, quietly, he was gone.

Death is a part of life. We hear this all the time and know it to be true. But rather than face it, we make wry comments: nobody is getting out of here alive; the only certainties are death and taxes; everyone who drinks any water will die. We Americans distance ourselves from death. Rarely do multiple-generation families live together under one roof, so the aging process is hidden from view. Only one in five of us will die at home. The rest of us will be sequestered, away from the eyes of children of every age.

For millennia, humankind has used euphemisms to talk about death: passed away, gone to sleep, entered eternal rest. Only recently have even Bible translators rendered the

verse from our morning's New Testament reading, "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died" rather than "those who are asleep."

Why are we so reticent to talk about death? Does the mention of death send us scurrying for cover, vainly seeking denial of death's reality and discounting evidence of death's inevitability? Are we blind to the contradiction of this attitude and what we profess as Christians? Why have such fears been expressed since the earliest generations of the Christian church? Why the inconsistency between what we say and how we live?

After receiving the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, the first disciples go forth to tell the good news of Jesus Christ and his victory over death. Paul, at first a persecutor of the Christian church, has a dramatic conversion experience. Blinded as he walks toward Damascus, Paul's eyes are opened to the truth that Jesus is the Son of God. His sight is restored, and Paul devotes the rest of his life to proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. The risen Lord will come again in glory. Jesus will bring about the perfect realization of God's kingdom. We will be united with our Lord for all eternity.

But time has passed. People – believers – have died. Jesus has not returned. Life seems to continue at the same petty pace as in eons gone by. Paul's new converts to the faith are disheartened. Is all lost for those who die before Jesus comes again in glory?

A word of context: ancient writings about the dead are grim and despairing. The deceased are referred to as without hope. There is nothing that can be said in the way of comfort. The people of Thessalonica wonder and worry: has Jesus Christ changed that? Are their deceased loved ones – those who have not lived until the Parousia, the Second Coming of Christ -- cut off from the promised new life that Paul had preached would be given to those who are in Christ?

Paul addresses this question in his letter to the Thessalonians, this epistle believed to be the oldest writing of the New Testament. Contrary to what Paul and other early Christians anticipated, the consummation of history seems to have been delayed. The expectation was that Jesus' return was imminent, but the seasons have continued to come and go. Those converted through Paul's preaching grow concerned: Is eternal life only for those still alive when Jesus comes again in glory? Is everyone else out of the equation, gone with the sands of time?

Paul's answer is an emphatic no. In Jesus Christ, death has been conquered for all time. In Jesus Christ, death is no longer the end point for humankind. While we mourn the loss from our daily lives of our loved ones, we Christians see death as part of a larger continuum. In life and in death we belong to God. God knows us before we breathe our first breaths. God nurtures and sustains us through life; God welcomes us into perfect peace at the end of our time on earth. Nothing, not even death, can sever our relationship with our Creator. At the time of resurrection, we will be united in perfect communion with God, with those who have preceded us in death, and with those who will succeed us in life. We are – and will continue to be – in the communion of the saints, in that blessed number who will someday go marching into the kingdom of God.

What will that day of days be like? What will happen in the end times? Paul's words are not to be taken literally -- what is to come is too great for any of us to fathom or accurately anticipate -- but Paul's answer draws upon what he has at hand: Old Testament symbolism and imagery. Paul affirms, as we must, God's majesty and glory. Paul asserts that the call to new life will not come from a human being or the angelic host but from the Lord himself. Paul assures us that Jesus Christ's coming will be a time of incomparable triumph. Nothing can equal or even approximate what it will be like when we enter into the presence of the Holy One who loves us without exception and who will provide for us for all eternity.

The current New York Times paperback non-fiction bestseller is Heaven is for Real. It is the account of a three year old who almost dies because of a misdiagnosed ruptured appendix. He tells his parents bits and pieces of his glimpse of heaven -- a place of light and colors and love. Countless other people have reported their own near death experiences and told of a great light and a feeling of peace.

What is on the other side of death? The details are not as important as our knowing that we will not be alone. We will be with God, who loves us with a perfect love. We will be reunited with those we have known and loved, who are held -- even now -- in God's everlasting arms. We will gather at table for the feast foreshadowed in the bread and cup we will share in a few minutes. We will eat the bread of life and drink from the cup of salvation, and all will be well. All will be right. All will be at peace. This we know in faith. Faith without such expectation "is like a ladder that leads nowhere, a voucher that is never redeemed" (Emil Bruner, Eternal Hope: 138, quoted in The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, Leon Morris: 147).

Friends, death is not to be feared. It leads to the coming time when we all will know perfect communion with God and one another. Death leads to a new reality, a reality that defies description. The Apostle Paul tries by painting a vivid picture with angels and trumpets and clouds of glory. A modern day visionary managed only, "Oh, wow! Oh, wow! Oh, wow!"

Let us encourage one another with these words.

Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Amen.

Mona Simpson, Steve Jobs' sister, recounted Steve's final words in the eulogy she gave for him on October 16, 2011 at Memorial Church, Stanford. It was reprinted in the October 30, 2011 *New York Times*.

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