

End, Enemy and Entryway

Between my stints in parish ministry, I moved to my hometown to help my father die and my mother transition to a new phase of life. During that time, Rachel and I cobbled together a living through various part- and full-time positions. My most rewarding work though came as an assistant to the local funeral director. I washed cars, dug graves, attended grieving families, assisted at funerals, and conducted them, too. I even toyed with the idea of getting my director's license and settling down to an entirely new career. In the end, I didn't. And I'm glad.

Throughout my time at the funeral home, I learned one thing. People no longer knew how to talk about death. They studiously avoided talking about death until someone they loved died. Then, they had to talk about death, but no longer had the vocabulary to do so. Death, as a concept and a lived reality had been removed from their experience.

How unlike the world in which my grandparents and even my parents lived. As I visited local cemeteries for work, I was often struck at how, somewhere around the 1950s, the dates of death became further separated from dates of birth. People began to live longer. Greater attention to farm safety and technological advancements reduced deaths from farm accidents. Better prenatal and post natal care meant more mothers survived childbirth, as did more children. Antibiotics made serious diseases treatable. Don't get me wrong—all of this is good! Thank God for it!

But there were two unintended consequences which have harmed our imaginations when it comes to death. First, death became a failure of medicine. Death happened because a doctor failed to extend life. Death had something to do with hospitals and professionals and was no longer a sad, sometimes tragic, but inevitable part of life. This leads to the second consequence. In my grandma's day, not only was it highly likely that you were born and then died in the same house, it was also very possible that your entry and exit from the world happened in the same bed. Death was a family event. From the fifties onward, death was slowly removed from the home and became the affair of specialists. The deaths of our loved ones were again, unintentionally, removed from our direct experience.

Death is now a medical problem that happens away from the living. And as a result, we've in many ways lost our capacity to talk about it meaningfully.

But what does the Bible say? That's what I want to reflect on with you this morning. On this Sunday when we remember those we love who have passed into God's presence, we are wise to think about the fact that, barring the return of Jesus, we *will* follow them. We are going to die. And one of the tasks of local churches in this modern age, one of my tasks as your pastor, is to help you recover your language both to talk about the deaths of people you love and so that you can prepare for your own.

Death as the End

Let's begin with an observation that might strike you as odd. The Bible speaks of death as the end. Why is that odd, as opposed to well, obvious? Well, it's odd because, well, doesn't the Bible speak of eternal life? Yes it does. Does that not mean life that is in some sense uninterrupted by death? Yes, in some sense it means that. So what do we mean when the Bible says that death is the end? Well, we mean just what we say. The Bible also teaches that death is the end. The severing

of relationship. And that means we have to fit these truths together, not simply deny one. So we start here. Death is the end.

In the oldest writings of the Old Testament, the rewards for faithfulness were, both as a people, and as individuals, the children of God, the nation of Israel, would remain in the land of promise. Honor your father and mother, says the commandment, that your days in the land might be long. Receive the teachings of your parents about how to love God and neighbor, in other words, and do them. If you do, you and your family and you kin group and your nation will live in peace and safety for a long time. If you are truly blessed by God, you will even get to see your children's children. The rewards for covenant faithfulness are rewards that happen in this world. Thus the Psalm on the slide:

The Lord bless you from Zion! May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life! May you see your children's children! Peace be upon Israel! (Psalm 128:5-6)

This is not, in its plain sense, a hope for heaven though it can and should be read as a foreshadow of that promise. In its plain sense, it is an expression of a hope for long life, children, and grandchildren as the tangible evidences of God's blessing.

Conversely to die is to be cut off, to use the language of the Psalmist. Cut off not only from the land of the living, but even from God. No one, says the Psalmist, praises you from the grave. No one proclaims your name among the dead (Ps. 6:5).

Death, biblically and at its most basic, is an end. Not just an end. It is the end. It is the end of relationships. For those who remain, it means the absence of a loved one. For those who die, it is quite literally the end of the world. And the Bible does not shy away from that. The Bible does not distract from that, or paper over that. The Bible acknowledges it. Death is the end. And so, on days lie today, we remember and we do mourn. We miss those whom we love, but who have died.

Death as the Enemy

The Bible does not stop there, though. It does not end with the end. The Bible has more to say about death, namely that death is an enemy. Now at one level, this is simply reflecting human experience isn't it? We experience death as an enemy. Even when death comes as a relief after a long period of suffering, it means that there is no hope for healing. That in some sense the devil has come to claim what's his. That the soul that has died has, in so doing, received what St. Paul calls the wages of sin.

But there's more to the Bible than simply a record of human experience! When we gave out the Bibles to our grade 5 students, we told them that the Bible was breathed out by God. It was divine speech, speaking divine truth, about a divine subject, namely God. So let's get back to the Scriptures themselves.

The story of the Old Testament is, in one telling, the story of the faithlessness of God's people. The covenant promises were not taught parent to child. The covenant promises were not received child from parent. The covenant promises were not obeyed by parents or their children.

Instead, God's people turned to idols, violating the first table of the Law. Instead, God's people looked out for themselves at the expense of their neighbors; they exploited the poor, the widow and the orphan, violating the second table of the Law. And eventually God has enough.

And the covenant curses kick in. The people, who had been promised a land forever, were vomited out by that land. They were sent into exile. The northern Kingdom of Israel was dispersed by the Assyrians. Later, the southern Kingdom of Judah was exiled by the Babylonians. And what is a people without a land? A people forgotten by God? They. Are. Dead.

But listen. That's not the end of the story. For in their exile, Israel remembered their God and they discovered that God had not—indeed could not—forget them. Though they were exiled, though they were in some sense dead, the God of life was present with them. God's love for his people was a love stronger than death. A love that would bring them back to the land. A love that would give them new life.

Now this love that is stronger than death was not simply a flowery way of saying God would bring the exiles home. He did that, of course. But if that's what we think, we've got the Bible's message exactly backwards. God raising the dead is not a metaphor for the end of exile. The end of exile is an object lesson preparing the people for the glorious truth of resurrection. The people returning to the land pointed them to a day when death itself would be destroyed. Why? Because death was not only an enemy of human flourishing. Death was God's own enemy. And God was going to win the day. Thus the words of the prophet from our Old Testament lesson:

And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering
that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread
over all nations. He will swallow up death forever;
(Isaiah 25:7-8)

Death as the Entryway

Now, Christians believe that this promised resurrection is not simply a future reality—though the fact of our cemeteries teach us that if nothing else. It is also an event that has already begun to happen. The resurrection started the first Easter Sunday when an angel rolled back the stone of the rock-hewn tomb to show to the bewildered terrified women that their Lord had already left. He is not here! He is risen. Go and tell his disciples.

This is not a one off. This is, St. Paul says, the first fruits. It's the beginning. This is the truth that the end of exile foreshadowed. Christ is raised! And if we have been buried with him a death like his, we shall also be raised in a resurrection like his (Romans 6). That happens at *every* baptism. And because of that hope, death while it remains an enemy is an enemy defanged. For all death can do to the believer is deliver them into the hands of the Lord who died and rose again. All death is for the believer is the entry way into fuller life with Jesus. Thus, St. Paul wrote from a prison cell these words:

“So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are

of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” (2 Cor 5:6-8)

Three Takeaways

We cannot explore a biblical theology of death this morning. But we have enough now to get the basics in place. The Bible teaches that Death is the end, the enemy both of humanity and God, and for the believer, an entryway into a more intimate life with the Lord. Let's take each takeaway in turn.

When we say that death is the end, we mean that. The life we enjoyed with the loved ones we remember today has ended. And so we mourn. This is the appropriate response. Listen: let no one, whether they profess faith in Christ or not, tell you anything different. Mourning is the right, proper and indeed Christian response to the deaths of those we love. So, have we shed tears today? They are good and holy tears. Do we miss the saints who have preceded us in death? Good! That means we loved them in life and love them still.

It is only after we have permitted ourselves to mourn in the face of the end that we can begin live in the Good News that Jesus has promised the defeat of death. Listen. Jesus does not turn death into a bump in the road, a seamless transition. Death is an enemy which had to be embraced by our Lord in order to defeat it. He tasted death for all of us and so robbed it of its sting and power. So we don't short circuit our mourning, or deny it. We do, though, hope. The Lord of life has declared himself the enemy of death. And that means death shall one day die. For that day we hope.

In the meantime, the Lord who conquered death is the Lord of the living and the dead. Indeed, the believing dead are through their union with Christ—the union established at their baptisms which death cannot destroy—drawn even closer to Christ when they die. And so we rejoice.

Mourning, hope and joy—they're all jumbled together today. Because we live in the inbetween, between the already and the not yet. We do not yet see as we hope. But we do see Jesus. And that is enough.