

Death Without Dread

Someone, seeing the sermon theme for today, asked me if this has grown out of my pastoral experience. I replied that indeed it had. Hardly a week goes by in which I am not confronted by death or the possibility of death. Therefore, it seems to be supremely relevant to our explorations as Christians when we come to worship.

John Shea in his introduction to his book ^{of} ~~the~~ stimulating poems, The God Who Fell From Heaven, recalls an episode on the Mary Tyler Moore show. The death of a friend prompted the newsroom members to speculate on arrangements for their own funerals. All began their plans with "When I die . . ." But when it came time for Ted Baxter to tell his plans he began with, "If I die . . ." (p.13) Ted Baxter was, of course, a most pretentious person, often a fool, so it was natural for him to pretend that he might not die. This is the situation with most of us. How often do we preface certain plan-making sessions by saying, "If ~~we~~ I were to die . . ." But the brilliant theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, long ago put his finger on our problem when he wrote: "Man is mortal. That is his fate. Man pretends not to be mortal. That is his sin." (Beyond Tragedy, p. 28) And what havoc, what ~~mischief~~ mischief such pretensions can play!

"Rollo May, another Christian thinker, has suggested that Americans who are ^{so} obsessed with materialism and sex and that this obsession is directly related to a ~~we~~ suppressed and overwhelming fear of death." (Christian Century, Dec. 31, 1980, p.1296) So we saturate our culture with a kind of sexual ~~vices~~ ^{Preoccupation} and we seek to adorn our lives, indeed smother them, in fine clothing, fine food, fine houses, beautiful cars and many luxurious vacations, just to cover up our dread of our mortality, our fear of one day dying. ^{The Super Bowl mania this afternoon will act out this effort to escape.}

But Leo Sandon, a writer several years ago most tellingly reminded us of our ~~mortality~~ by citing something from the life of Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great. Philip had a slave whose assignment it was

every morning of Philip's life to enter the king's presence, regardless of what he might be doing, and to say to him, "Remember, Philip, thou must die." Sandon pointed out that Philip was in effect observing Ash Wednesday each day of his life. "To understand that in the midst of life we are in death," is the beginning of wisdom." (Christian Century, March 21, 1979, p.302)

In effect, then, what I want to do for all of us this morning is to say: "Remember, mortal souls, you will one day die." It does not matter who you are, or how rich or poor you are. It does not matter what kind of a house you live ⁱⁿ, what clothes you wear, what clubs you belong to. It does not matter how much power you have or how many people you can push around. The number of prizes in your trophy room is irrelevant. It does not even matter how good a Christian you might be. I am telling you what you already know, once you clear away the clutter and collateral of your life: You will one day die.

This is a sermon I have been planning for a long, long time. The file of ideas and references and reflections I assembled ~~converged into~~ ^{ballooned into} a bulge. But let me tell you where the essential motivation came from. Three years ago this summer in the Princeton Theological Seminary chapel we sang one evening a beautiful hymn from the Presbyterian Hymnal. The hymn's first verse is this:

All praise to thee, my God, this night
For all the blessings of the light!
Keep me, O keep me, King of Kings,
Beneath thine own almighty wings.

Since it was evening in Princeton, after a busy and mind-filling day, and I knew that within a short time I would be lying down to sleep, the third verse really caught me:

Teach me to live, that I may dread
The grave as little as my bed;
Teach me to die, that so I may
Rise glorious at the Judgement Day. (No. 493)

^{Singing} ~~As we sang~~ those words, ~~xxxxxxnightxxxxxxx~~ as night was falling, I fell under the spell of that beautiful thought. If only we mortals could learn to dread the grave as little as our bed!

Thinking about death, hearing ~~xxxxxx~~ and seeing the frightening

The Apostle Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians speaks at length about death. And then he relates death and our fear of death to the fact of our sin. Ultimately he exclaims:

When the perishable puts on the imperishable,
and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come
to pass the saying that is written:

"Death is swallowed up in victory.

O death, where is thy victory?

O death, where is thy sting?"

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is
the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the
victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

(I Cor. 15:54-57, RSV)

In that faith the Christian is taught so to live, that he may dread the grave
as little as his bed.

Just a few weeks ago Abigail Van Buren printed a piece by Henry Scott
Holland that expresses for the Christian this confidence in God's Eternity:

I am standing on the seashore. A ship spreads her sails to
the morning breeze and starts for the ocean. I stand watching
her until she fades on the horizon, and someone at my side says,
"She is gone!"

Gone where? The loss of sight is in me, not in her. Just at the
moment when someone says, "She is gone," there are others who
are watching her coming. Other voices take up the glad shout,
"Here she comes!"

And that is dying. (Dec. 26, 1981)

Does that help dispell the dread of death?

Let us be honest and admit that there is a lot of ~~XXXXXX~~ saccarine
and sentimental nonsense about death. No one of us should become so sentimental
as to deny that we are confronted by a vast and dreadful mystery. In moments
of death we sometimes ~~hear~~ ^{hear} the fiend voices rage, and death for many is an
agony. This morning I do not have a photo album showing you in living color
pictures from the other side of this life. Just being born is for all of us
a risk that we did not undertake ourselves. From somewhere all of us have to
summon the courage to accept our mortality, and to grapple with the fears of
dying. There are quite a few people who find life more fearful and devastating
in its burden than they fear death, so they take their own lives. Many of
them are distressingly young. But however we may regard our own deaths, there

are ways of coping with it. I am not here this morning inclined to describe
I see no Golden Streets and balmy shores.
 for you even in spiritual terms what heaven and eternity might be like. ^R Rather
 I would like to ~~help you~~

(Help) you live, that you may dread
 The grave as little as your bed;

The words of Thomas Ken in this beloved hymn are most helpful. Let us think
 of what they suggest.

-I-

To begin with, we do have to admit, do we not, that we have a certain
 dread. But we ought to hear what the late great theologian Martin Buber
 had to say about dread. "Dread," declared Buber, "is the gateway to God."

Supposing that we lived in this world without any dread whatsoever.
 What would you learn? How could you learn, anything? Remember, too, the words
 of that other beloved hymn:

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
 And grace my fears relieved;
 How precious did that grace appear
 The hour I first believed!

Could it be by grace that we learn to fear? How does a child ever learn about
 the dangers of traffic in a heavily traveled intersection, ~~if~~ some dread is
 not instilled?

One of the most astute theologians of our time is Joseph Sittler, now
 quite advanced in years. Recently his probings about death were recalled:

The fear of death, I'm convinced, is at the
 bottom of all apprehensions. To say of any of us
 that we do not fear death is a lie. To be human is
 to fear death. To love life is to hope and to wish
 not to leave it. And all people fear death. I think
 that is one of the most creative fears there is
 because it bestows a value, an affection and a gratitude
 for life which otherwise there would not be. That is
 what the Psalm (90) means by the statement, "So teach
 us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom."

At the heart of the Christian message is the affirm-
 ation that God himself enters our dying . . . This means
 that the Christian faith does not abolish or eliminate the
 fear of death; rather it erects, along with it the confession
 that God is the life of life. God does not finally die.
 If any man's life be a participation in the eternal life
 of God, his life is also a part of that which is not
 destroyed. (Christian Century, Sept. 26, 1979, p.917)

Last summer when we were visiting our daughter in Tulsa I had a delightful time every day with my little four-year old granddaughter, Abby, in the swimming pool. She is just like a little guppy in the water! My daughter, Debby, tells me that when she first started to test the water she was terribly afraid. But last summer she simply exhausted ~~her~~ grandfather who went swimming ~~with~~ with her. She positioned me in the water and she delighted in jumping in, knowing that no matter how deep the water ^{or how often she jumped,} I would catch her. Over and over again she would climb up out of the water and immediately jump again - right at me, knowing that I ~~was~~ ^{would be} there to catch her. She had total trust that I would catch her, and that I would not let her sink. Perhaps that is the kind of faith that we can have, not in each other, but in God. As the followers of Christ we can keep ^{Pitching and Lurching} ~~jumping~~ into all kinds of risks and adventures because we believe that God is there to uphold us. And then there is the final leap into death. In the faith we have been given in Christ, all of us might very well go to bed tonight singing in our hearts:

All praise to thee, My God, this night
For all the blessings of the light!
Keep me, O keep me, King of kings,
Beneath thine own almighty wings.

Teach me to live, that I may dread
The grave as little as my bed;
Teach me to die, that so I may
Rise glorious at the Judgement Day.

Hence,

"Death is swallowed up in victory.
O death, where is thy victory?
O death, where is thy sting?

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An intelligent and well-informed dread, then, can lead us to an understanding relationship with God. We speak of "the fear of God." Were we never to dread or fear the unfathomable ^{and unsearchable} greatness and grandeur of God we would never respect or worship him. So a deep appraisal of life in this world, a sensitivity to its awe-inspiring creativeness and the marvels of human life, will lead us to the throne of God. In the fear of God you will learn, and then your faith will be in him.

-II-

For another thing the words of this lovely ^{hymn} ~~hymn~~ teach us that we can be taught so to live that we will not be afraid to die. Indeed, being taught to live will teach us how to die, graciously, lovingly, faithfully.

Recently a wonderful man who had faced in his own life a serious illness and surgery, and who then had to endure the loss of ^a ~~his~~ loved one very close to ^{him} ~~me~~, said to me in the midst of his crises that he did not really have any fear of dying (Lyle Hill). But do you know what I think is a large measure of his serenity and strength? I think it is due to his caring for so many other people, the way he enters into ministry to others, assisting those along the way who could not possibly make it without his caring and concern. I stand in awe of his fearlessness of death, but I know that behind that ^{are} ~~is~~ his self-giving and concern for others. I think that is what is meant by being taught to live so that one will fear the grave as little as his bed. As a pastor I see this witness, this grace, this strength over and over.

Facing death, then, without dread, is a matter of our Christian faith. Frederick Buechner, the talented novelist who writes ^{from} ~~with~~ a Christian perspective, has this faith. At the age of 53 he muses about death:

I know no more now than I ever did about the far side of death as the last letting-go of all, but I begin to know that I do not need to know and that I do not need to be afraid of not ~~not~~ knowing. God knows. That is all that matters. ("All's Lost, All's Found," in "How My Mind Has Changed" series, Christian Century, March 28, 1980, p. 284)

If you can believe that God knows and that God is good, then you need have no fear of death, for God is good, and God is great. You can let-go.