

A Funeral Sermon

Introduction and Scripture:

Revelation is the last book of the Bible and speaks of the end times. In it the author declares that God created all things, and that what is to come is like a new city given as a gift to all people. A voice from heaven indicates that in this city death and grief no longer have any place. This is where God's promises of salvation are finally fulfilled.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

SERMON

When I was in seminary – preaching class – our professor gave us some words of wisdom. He said that at least once a year, every pastor ought to preach a funeral sermon on a Sunday morning.

Because, he said, there are people in your church who have lost someone they loved or knew, and for whom there was (for whatever reason) no funeral service. There are people in your church who are grieving losses which perhaps no one else knows: miscarriages, an estranged sibling, an ex-spouse. There are people in your church who have complicated grief, which seems to deepen as time passes, rather than lessen.

And all this needs to be lifted to our Lord. There are two Sundays in the year which are most appropriate for this: Memorial Day (though the focus there is on those who have died in service of our country). And TODAY – All Saints Day

Since the 8th C, the church has set apart the 1st day of November as a memorial day for all those who have died in the faith. It was established not to celebrate the virtues of the saints, but rather the love of Christ that was evident in their lives.

And so, because there are so many from our church who died during COVID for whom there was no opportunity for a full gathering, today is that gathering.

Today – after the sermon - we will remember 19 saints who, though they are at home with the Lord, are still very close to us in our hearts and memories.

It's also fitting that we celebrate All Saints Day on a Communion Sunday – also a day of remembering one who has died – Jesus.

In the Apostles' Creed (and Nicene Creed) – there is a line towards the end....

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church,
The communion of saints...

I recently read a blog post about the Communion of Saints and this was in the comment section...

One Easter when I was waiting to be ushered up to the rail for communion, I had a mental picture of Jesus handing out bread, feeding the 5,000, and the people stretched out and covered the hills in the distance. And I realized that the communion of believers stretches back into the past and into the future. I often remember that mental picture when I'm proclaiming the creed. (Ginger Johnson)

When we receive Jesus in the bread and cup (even when it's an awkward little plastic one) we are in communion with (of course) Jesus; but also, with those who have come before us and those who will come after.

A parishioner in my previous church knew the truth of this like I've never seen before. He had lost his daughter to a heroin overdose when she was in her 30's. His grief was complicated to say the least. And Dick would never miss a communion Sunday; because (he told me), it is when he is receiving the bread and the cup that he feels Sharon's presence most palpably. It brought him to tears every time.

There are all types of grief because there are all types of death.

Here's more wisdom from my preaching class in seminary.... At some point in the semester, we each had to preach a funeral sermon. And the professor would give us our "family situation" 4-5 days before our assignment was due. They were all taken from real life – families / deaths he had known during his days as a pastor. Some were what we might call a "beautiful death" – after a long life, family gathered around, pain-free. Others were harder – an infant, a suicide, a murder, an accident. And as inexperienced and young, we stumbled our way through these more heart-wrenching deaths.

After a couple of them, the professor shared the other kernel of wisdom that has stayed with me. He said, "Look, it doesn't matter HOW someone died, or what the situation is. EVERYONE needs to hear the resurrection – just preach the resurrection!"

Yes! The Good News is that God is able to transform the most complicated grief, the darkest days, into a morning of light and new life. It is terribly difficult to live with death and mourning

and crying and pain, and this is why, as we heard in our reading, we are told the end of the story even before it happens.

The best spoiler alert ever! Because knowing the end of the story equips us to live through it to the life God wants for us – a life of hope and peace and joy even.

Here is a story of a “good death.” Winnie DeJonge died a year ago, and her daughter, Heidi, tells of her final months and days:

Although my mom’s diagnosis in November of 2019 disoriented her (and all of us) and broke her heart (and all of our hearts), once Mom decided to stop treatment, I watched the Calm of Home come over her. She knew exactly where to be and where she was going. She was at home and she was going Home.

She even seemed to know when she was going to make that transition from home to Home.

In May of 2020, just before her 70th birthday, her doctor gave her the six-month prognosis. We all knew that this was just a guess, but Mom wrote it on the calendar of her heart. Six months after May 2020 was November 2020. And sure enough, the first of November was the day we decided it was time for me to come to be with her for the end. On that day, my sister, Tracy, changed the calendar that hung on the wall next to Mom’s spot on the couch. Mom looked at her and said, “It’s November!” And later that month, after Mom had gone, Tracy found the piece of paper in Mom’s purse with the list of new passwords she had made for some of her accounts (after having her Facebook account hacked that summer). All her new passwords were variations of “November2020!”

So, in some sense, Mom knew when she was going. She knew where she was going. But she (and all of us) wondered how it would be in the end. I remember sitting in my parents’ basement during our full family’s last visit to Mom in the summer of 2020. I was on the phone with someone from my mom’s hospice team. “I know you can’t predict the future and you don’t know for sure, but what’s your best guess about what it will be like in the end?” I asked her.

“Well,” she said. “It will probably be a little like falling off a cliff.”

*Now, this may sound scary and horrifying—perhaps a strange answer to my question. But to me, these words were a mighty comfort. Just that morning, I had joined Mom in her happy place with a cup of coffee. On her lap was her well-worn copy *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. C.S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* [in which the lion Aslan is the Christ figure] were the first chapter books I remember my mom reading to me as a child. “Will you read me a chapter, Mom?” I asked. She opened the book to the chapter she was on: *The Wonders of the Last Sea*.*

In this chapter, Lucy and Edmund and their cousin, Eustace, are with Prince Caspian, Lord Drinian, Reepicheep the mouse, and others. They are sailing on the Dawn Treader and everything is getting brighter and brighter and moving faster and faster. They figure that they are heading for the very edge of the world.

“You mean,” said Caspian, “that we might be just—well, poured over it?”

“Yes, yes,” cried Reepicheep, clapping his paws together. “That’s how I’ve always imagined it—the World like a great round table and the waters of all the oceans endlessly pouring over the edge. The ship will tip up—stand on her head—for one moment we shall see over the edge—and then, down, down, the rush, the speed—”

“And what do you think will be waiting for us at the bottom, eh?” said Drinian.

“Aslan’s country, perhaps,” said the mouse, its eyes shining. “Or perhaps there isn’t any bottom. Perhaps it goes down for ever and ever. But whatever it is, won’t it be worth anything just to have looked for one moment beyond the edge of the world.”

With the glee of Reepicheep, my mom got brighter and brighter and moved faster and faster. And she was more and more certain of who she was and where she was going.

And friends, let me tell you, that at the end—at the very end—I caught a glimpse of the edge of the world. On Wednesday evening, November 4, I had just had my last conversation with Mom. My brother was taking his turn, and then he called to us, “I think you need to come. Something is different.” And we rushed to her side. Her eyes had opened just a little bit. We grasped her hands, her shoulder, her arm. And we sang.

We sang the doxology – the same song she sang in the delivery room when my sister was born and she knew that I, as her oldest daughter, would have what she never had – a sister.

We sang Rest in Him – the lullaby she’d sung to us when we had a hard time falling asleep at night.

We sang Go Now in Peace – the song she taught countless children through the years as a Young Children and Worship storyteller.

And then my sister, with the voice of a prophet, an angel, and a lioness, began to recite Psalm 23. The rest of us wept and shouted encouragement to her as Mom labored through her final breaths.

And somewhere in the midst of those familiar phrases, Mom reached the very edge of the Last Sea. And with her eyes shining, she released a single tear, and went over the cliff.

She knew exactly who and where she was.

She knows exactly who and where she is.

Fall in peace, Mom. We'll see you when we get there.

(Heidi S. De Jonge, Reformed Journal, August 6, 2021. Pastor of Westside Fellowship Christian Reformed Church, Kingston, Ontario.)

"See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." (Revelation 21:3-5)

Those who have died are seeing God face to face, wrapped in a love so immense we cannot even imagine it.

And we who remain, grieve and remember. Which is what today is all about. Remembering the saints who have graced our lives as individuals and as a church.

The author Frederick Buechner says this about saints: *In His holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints.*

So, today we remember those saints who though they are at home with the Lord, are still very close to us in our hearts and memories...

All Saints Remembrance

Russell Beede
Peter Brooke
Pat Davis
Richard Fivek
Nan Hoeflich
Sumner Hopkins
Otto Judicke
Gail Kearns
John Kohl
Allene Kussin

Lois Macy
David McKown
Marty Nestor
Gloria Pinkham
Barbara Platt
Chuck Stevenson
Peg Waller
Bob Watson
Kelvey Woodman