

## **THE REALITY OF DEATH – FACE IT**

**Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close, Grace Church, June 10, 2007, 2 Pentecost**

We treat death very differently today than when I was young. I can remember a great aunt dying and the body was prepared in the home, the viewing held there and the service and cemetery following. Nowadays, we are very afraid of death. We deny it and isolate ourselves from it. We take people off to die in hospitals or some convenient place. Too many parents refuse to take their children to funerals because it might “upset them.” That seems funny to me when you think of all the violence and death they see everyday on television. They can place video games and see killing happen over and over again. But these deaths only seem to dull the senses and make us even more disconnected from death.

I am at the age in my life when I have seen the deaths of many people. I am an orphan ... my parents and grandparents are all gone. I have seen half a dozen aunts and uncles die along with some friends and classmates. My profession puts me in touch with death all the time. This week there will be three funerals at which I will officiate. I have helped start a Hospice and did my doctoral work on death and dying around the issue of AIDS. My wife and I have experienced the lost of two pregnancies. Death is very real for me.

I can remember the first real death I experienced. It was my grandfather, Baba, my dad’s father. I went to the funeral parlor and saw him lying in the coffin. He looked the same and different. I was about 8 years old. This was a man I loved and adored. He took me for long walks whenever I visited ... in the cemetery across from where he lived. I gazed at his face and expected the closed eyes to open at any time. I reached out to touch his hand. It was hard and cold. I felt sadness. I remember reaching up and kissing him on the forehead ... then leaving ... never to see him again.

Why are we so afraid of death? The newspapers report every day the number of soldiers and civilians that die in Iraq. This is noted along with the latest murders in Philadelphia, or hit and run in New Jersey. We hear on the television about the young girl kidnapped and murdered ... but we shy away from talking about death. A young boy in our community commits suicide and we rush teams of counselors to the high school to help them deal with “it.” Why is it we are so out of sorts that we can’t talk about death? Living and dying go together. Where is all the fear coming from? The denial? The anxiety?

Maybe even more important ... what are we as Christians suppose to make of death? The Bible is filled with stories about it. Jesus Christ himself dies ... what truth are we to take from the Bible to help us in today’s world. My seminary professor of New Testament, Reggie Fuller, recently died. What he had to say about this passage from Luke is that there is a great truth here. It is this ... that God is the one who visits us to bring us LIFE! Maybe we need to talk more about death so we can understand what it means to live!

Today’s readings from Kings and Luke present us with interesting stories. Both speak of miracles. Both speak of men from God that reminds us of God’s presence. In both cases, there are others, a widow and son, in the story. One of things that we need to remember is that widows were among the least of the society for both Elijah and Jesus’ times. A widow had no way to support herself and was dependent on a family member, particularly a son, for existence. Both stories talk about the son being resuscitated. The death of the son

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means despair and hopelessness for the widows. When both sons are brought back, there is life!

In Kings, we hear about Elijah, but we need a little background. Elijah has said the drought was coming. He is at odds with King Ahab who worships a false god, Baal. God sends him into the very heart of the enemy territory, to Zarephath (which means ambush of the mouth) to face their Baal. Do you know what this god was lord of? The rain! Elijah is challenging the false god! He comes to rely on the hospitality of a poor widow. She is about to prepare her last meal ... and to eat and then die from the famine the drought has wrought. Elijah asks her for drink and food, and she complies! What a shock for her when her son dies! This is her payment? The prophet says not to fear. But Elijah takes the boy, prays for him, touches him and the boy is healed! He's alive! The widow comes to see that Elijah is one through whom the true God brings life into the world!

Now we jumped years ahead to Jesus. He is just coming from the miracle of healing the centurion's slave. Now he approaches Nain (which means pleasant place) and meets a funeral procession. A widow has lost her son. She is without hope and in deep grief. What is Jesus' first reaction? It is that of a loving God ... compassion (mercy)! Jesus touches the funeral bier carrying the dead son. He speaks, "Rise up!" and the son is alive! There is life once again! There is hope for the widow! The crowd react with fear at first ... what's this that's going on? Then they turn to praise God!

Both Elijah and Jesus break with conventional practices. It was forbidden to touch a death body because you were unclean for seven days. Both ignore the ritual to respond to the person in need. Elijah prays to God, and God works through him to bring life back to the son. He is indeed a prophet, a holy man. Jesus speaks, and the son is alive! This is a greater miracle and points us towards the presence of God in an even more powerful way! The other thing we have to remember is that both of these sons are alive for now, but they will die again. Everyone dies. It is the way of all things!

Perhaps we could learn from Israel's approach to life and death. It was not something to be avoided ... it just was! It was a part of life. Maybe it's time for us to stop fearing death and start living. Maybe it's time for us to stop isolating ourselves and our children from death and face it! We can all wish for the miracle of resuscitation, but Jesus and Elijah are not here to raise these people for us. The truth we have to live with is that all of us will die. Maybe now would be a good time to start living.

The Bible tells us that we have a God who is God of life. That's the meaning of the Resurrection. Jesus died and God raised him to a new way of being. We will share in that new being after our deaths. But for now, we have to start living the gift of life that God has already given us. I often tell people of the 97-year-old man, George, that I visited with my first Church in New Jersey. I once asked him what the secret to living so long was. George answered me, "Any day you wake up is a good day!" It can't be that simple, can it? Life is meant to be lived; maybe we should start living it!

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I learned a great deal about living from AIDS patients I worked with over the years. One of the first was a woman named Karen. She contacted AIDS from her husband, who was an IV drug user, unbeknownst to her! They divorced, and she learned later that he died only to find out that he had passed the death sentence onto her. She went from having a successful career and home to having to apply for welfare and Medicare to support her and her son. Karen's attitude impressed me most. Once, we were talking, and she shared with me that many things kept her going. One was love for her son, another a faith that was unshaken by the illness. She shared with me that she saw every day as a gift ... and she was going to make the most of the gift that God had given her. Wow! Can we see each day as a gift? I hired her to be my parish secretary ... I wanted that kind of witness around me!

There are many things that the Scriptures invite us to think and do today. We don't have to be afraid of death. We are called to have compassion for others, to reach out and touch others. We are asked to listen for the word of God and to expect miracles. Perhaps most important, we are to live each day as the gift from God that it is to us! Think about the people who share with us that it took a near death experience or the death of a loved one to make them appreciate what's really important in life. What if today is the last day of our life? Who would we want to see and talk with or what would we want to do with the gift of this day?

The way of Jesus Christ is the way of celebrating life. We don't have to be afraid of death. There is something on the other side of the threshold that we call death. We don't know what it is exactly ... but God promises us that a new way of being awaits us. For now, we can be loving and compassionate. For now, we can be welcoming and appreciative. For now, we have the gift of life ... and we need to live it! We can boldly face death. It doesn't mean that we can't grieve ... that is only natural to mourn those we lose. But we are to remember a God that visits us to dwell with us. This God sent Elijah to make the word of the Lord known to the people. This God sent us Jesus who would live as one of us, die like we will and initiate a new way with the Resurrection!

Any day we wake up is a good day. It's a gift ... now what will we make with the gift of this day from God? Amen.