

“Resurrection Hope”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
November 6, 2011

1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18

Death and dying. It’s a topic we would rather not talk about. It makes us depressed, brings back bad memories, and we will find any way to make it more palatable for our emotional tastes. We do it all the time – both in our individual lives, and as a society.

One such example happened to me and Debbie last Sunday. We were at the Verizon Wireless store, getting our new iPhones – Debbie has hers, I’m still waiting for mine. Anyway, because she is an employee at St. Vincent’s, Debbie gets an employee discount. She handed her photo ID to the sales person. When the sales person saw that Debbie was a chaplain, she asked Debbie, “So, how do you give someone the bad news, you know, when someone passes away?”

Debbie said, “I tell them that their loved one has died.” “Really? You tell them, just like that? Isn’t that hard?” Debbie replied, “Yes, but it’s better to be clear about it than to be ambiguous.” And Debbie told us the following story.

A man came in to the Emergency Room at St. Vincent’s by ambulance in very serious condition. The physicians and nurses worked and worked on him, but they were unable to help him, and he died. His wife arrived at the hospital not long after he had died, and she was waiting in a small room when the physician came in to speak to her. “Mrs. Smith,” the doctor said, “we did everything we could do, but I am sorry, we lost him.” The woman, already in a state of shock from all that was happening, responded, “Well, find him! Find him!”

We don’t talk about death in clear, unambiguous ways as Americans. We believe we are making things easier on people by using phrases like “passed away,” “gone,” or “lost.” In fact, in our attempt to speak of death in easier ways, we are likely making it much more difficult. And such phrases inherently speak to our uneasiness about death and dying. It’s not so much about what makes death sound easier for other people; it’s what makes it sound more palatable for us.

When Paul is writing to the church in Thessalonica, he is writing to believers who have real concerns about death and dying. Their context is a bit different than ours today, but they share our modern-day concern of what happens after our life here on earth is done. Jennifer McBride describes it in this way:

Paul’s intent in this letter is not to offer a general description of the end times. Rather, this passage deals with a specific concern unique to the early church and absent from the thinking of most Christians today. The Christians in Thessalonica were confident that Christ’s second coming would happen immediately, in their lifetime. This was complicated by the fact that some of the faithful had already died, and thus questions arose concerning whether those Christians who died unexpectedly would also share in the glory of the resurrected Jesus at his coming. Paul not only attends to the fate of those who died, but also envisions the encounter between the coming Lord and those who were still alive.

Jürgen Moltmann argues that eschatology is first and foremost not about ends but about beginnings – about the new creation of all things. “See, I am making all things new,”

John of Patmos hears a voice say in Revelation 21:5. This new creation is grounded and participates in the raising of the crucified Christ: "We believe that Jesus died and rose again," Paul tells the church in Thessalonica (4:14), and so Christians are fundamentally people of "hope," people who eagerly await the new thing the resurrected Christ brings.

The advent of Christ occurs, not only in the birth of the Christ child that we will celebrate in the weeks ahead, and not only in the second coming when Christ returns in glory, but also in the Spirit who brings the new into our this-worldly life . . . The coming Christ purposes to do a new thing: the advent of Christ brings the impossible, turns a rock into a pool of water, makes a way where there is no way (Psalm 114:8; Isaiah 43:19). This is what the coming of Christ means for us who are alive (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2011: 214).

Whenever we hold a service at someone's death, we call it "a service of witness to the resurrection." In other words, we proclaim we are witnesses to a new beginning in Christ, not an ending which occurs at the time of death. For in our worship of witnessing to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we affirm that God is more powerful than death, and is the giver of eternal life.

Paul also speaks to this crux of the Christian faith when he writes to the church in Philippi. Jesus was God's Incarnate Word, and could have chosen to use his equality with God for his own self-serving purposes. Instead, "he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross" (2:7-8). God's only Son did what only God could do: love us so unconditionally that instead of saving himself, he chose to save his fallen, sinful creatures.

As a result, God "highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (2:9-11). Through his humility, Jesus served all of humanity. Through his humanity, Jesus fulfilled his divine purpose. Through God's grace, we are promised life eternal through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

Last Tuesday was November 1, a day which is significant not just for being the day after Halloween. In the church calendar, it is All Saints' Day, a day each year when we remember with thanksgiving those who have died and entered "a new creation." For each of us in this room, we have been touched by death in some way. It may have been a spouse, a parent, a friend, a neighbor, a co-worker. It may have been as close as last week, or as distant as years ago.

No matter the situation, the foundation of our Christian faith is that death is not something to make palatable, but to recognize that even when the end of this earthly life is upon us - we are nevertheless hopeful witnesses of God's grace. For as Paul proclaims to the Thessalonians: "Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died . . . Then we who are alive will meet the Lord and be with the Lord forever" (4:14,17). Our call is to live every day in faith that "nothing in life or in death will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

Thanks be to God. Amen.