THE HOPE TO WHICH WE HAVE BEEN CALLED

EPHESIANS 1:15-23
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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(MEMORIAL SUNDAY)

Today is the last Sunday before the season of Advent begins and with it a new Christian year.

It is a Sunday that our church has traditionally devoted to remembering those among us who have died in the past year as well as to more generally focus on people we have loved and lost.

Some traditions call it "Memorial Sunday." Others refer to it as "Eternity Sunday." Still others refer to this Sunday as "Reign of Christ" or "Christ the King" Sunday.

Carol Penner summarizes what this Sunday is about:

> Eternity Sunday turns our attention to the reality of death in our community, and it points us to the hope that we have in Jesus Christ. We come together to say, "Yes, we grieve", but we do not grieve as those who have no hope (I Thessalonians 4:13).[1]

***It turns our attention to the reality of death*.**

This, in and of itself, makes this Sunday's service profoundly countercultural.

[1] https://lendrumchurch.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Eternity-Sunday-Hopeful-People.pdf

Of all the things we *could* pay attention to, of all the things we are conditioned to pay attention to, whether through TV or advertising or social media or chatter around the water cooler, death would be very low on the list. For the most part, we studiously avoid the subject.

Yesterday, some of us attended an event put on by the Alberta Mennonite Historical Society in conjunction with the Japanese Nikkei society here in Lethbridge. Authors Rudy Wiebe and Joy Kogawa were the featured speakers.

At one point, someone asked them what their favourite books were. Rudy seemed somewhat embarrassed when he said, "probably Leo Tolstoy's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich.* It's morbid and talks about death a lot, but we Mennonites are kind of like that." We all laughed.

And then he looked up and said, "But we *are* all dying. You know that right?" And our laughter turned a bit more awkward.

But he's right. We are all dying, even if we would prefer not to think about it.

So, this is the first thing we must do. We must face death. We must name this uncomfortable reality unflinchingly and accurately.

Last week, I came across an article by Peter Marty, publisher of the Christian Century and senior pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Davenport, Iowa. The article is about the language we use around death. It's called "People Don't 'Pass Away'" and I'd like to read an excerpt.

> I passed on the chocolate dessert tray in the restaurant last night, tempting as it was. I dread passing through the… screening lines at the airport when I'm in a hurry. I pass columns like this your way hoping to stir your heart and mind on matters of faith and life.
>
> One thing I will never pass, however, is away. I expect to die, and you'd be smart to expect the same. But neither of us will "pass away." I know the phrase has become increasingly popular in recent decades; some would say irritatingly popular. A survey of contemporary obituaries reveals that nearly 50 percent of families no longer refer to the death of their loved one. Mom merely "passed away." Or, when brevity is in vogue, she "passed."

A funeral director I know thinks this linguistic trend is an attempt to make death sound less cold, more gentle, and not so harsh. That sounds about right. We don't do well with the finality of death. We like to keep it at arm's length. To speak of mother's death as a "passing" is to lend a wispy and soft feel to her disappearance, almost as if an unsuspecting wind mysteriously swept her out of view.

"When a person is born we rejoice," anthropologist Margaret Mead once wrote. "And when they're married we jubilate. But when they die we try to pretend nothing has happened." To pretend as if the sudden absence of our best friend's voice or laugh at the table doesn't affect us is to perform a disservice to ourselves. Faith allows us to honor the reality and finality of death. It teaches us that grief can be a gift, just as tears rolling down the cheek can be a love offering for that friend who has died…

Jesus Christ overcame death and the grave. We're never told he holds a victory flag over our passing away. If that were the case we'd have to rewrite Paul to read: "'Passed away has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O passed away, is your victory? Where, O passed away, is your sting?'"

When the day arrives for me to shutter my eyes for a final time and breathe my last, who knows what euphemisms… will be uttered? Peter "checked out." He "kicked the bucket." He's "juggling haloes now." I guess he's "taking up harp." Or, in the elegant poetry of E. E. Cummings, he "started a worm farm."

But those who know me best, and the confidence I have in God, only need four words: Peter died in faith. That will do it. Those four words will speak honesty, truth, and love, all at the same time. And the Lord will be praised.[2]

I think Peter Marty is absolutely right. One of the gifts of faith is to be able to name reality accurately, to look death squarely in the eye, and to do so with confident faith.

This doesn't mean that we are naïve about death. Not by any means. It doesn't mean that we pretend that the death of those we love doesn't hurt or leave a hole.

[2] https://www.christiancentury.org/article/publisher/people-dont-pass-away

But our remembering and grieving always takes place in the context of faith and hope.

And not just a kind of generic "faith" and "hope." These words often float around our experiences with death and dying in a kind of vague and sentimental way, particularly in our post-Christian context.

They sound nice and we hope they point to what we hope will be a pleasant post-mortem existence for those we have lost. But they often have very little solidity or theological weight to them.

So the second, and more important thing we must do, is to face death *Christianly*. This brings us to our passage from Ephesians.

The passage is a prayer of Paul's for the church in Ephesus. After giving thanks for their faith and the love that they show toward one another, he prays that they would have a spirit of wisdom and revelation, that their hearts would be enlightened.

Why? For what purpose?

So that they might know the hope to which Christ has called them. And that they might have a glimpse of the power of God.

What is this hope? Nothing less than participation in the kingdom of God in the new heavens and the new earth. Nothing less than being *with Christ*, the object of our hope and our longing. "The riches of his glorious inheritance," as Paul puts it (Eph. 1:18).

And what is this power? What is the decisive demonstration of the power of God? For Paul, the power and purpose of God is seen in his the central event of all of salvation history: Raising Christ from the dead.

The scope and majesty of creation is impressive, to be sure, and it demonstrates the power of God in marvelous ways. But it is the defeat of death that Paul and the early church consistently pointed to as God's most awe-inspiring display of power.

Without Christ's defeat of death, Paul says, our faith is futile and we still in our sins (1 Cor. 15:17). Those are strong words. Paul knew that without the defeat of death, Jesus was just another idealistic teacher who met an early end. And we are without hope.

Do we still believe this?

It's not very fashionable to talk about Jesus as the victor over death any more. At least it doesn't seem to be in some circles. We're fine with talking about Jesus' social ethic, with his words about love and peace and forgiveness.

We very much like the idea of Jesus cracking the whip in the temple and putting all those greedy religious merchants in their place. We're quite fond of the Jesus who came to proclaim good news to the poor and to challenge a corrupt and brutal empire.

We are happy to jump on board the Jesus train so long as we stay on the track of mostly this-worldly concerns, as long Jesus basically conforms to and validates our image of a good twenty-first century postmodern citizen with their collection of social concerns.

But sometimes we're a little embarrassed about the other Jesus. The Jesus who performs head-scratching miracles and casts out demons and talks about his father's house with many rooms and raises up little dead girls and summons people from the tomb.

These are mostly metaphors, aren't they? All this supernatural business, all this talk of "heaven," all these stories about "resurrection"—this is all mostly just a bit of poetry, right?

Nobody takes all that stuff literally, surely. Primitive folks who thought the earth was flat and had never heard of penicillin believed all those weird and wonderful things, but we're far too sophisticated for that, these days. We know that Jesus' concerns were mostly political and social in nature. All that supernatural language is mostly poetic window-dressing around the call to be better people and make the world a better place. Right?

Wrong.

I think that any of us who have stood over the graveside of a loved one know that we need Jesus to be more than just an inspiring teacher or a good example. We need a victor over the enemy of life that haunts our steps, and that steals those we love.

This was never clearer to me than three years ago when I did the funeral for the ten-year-old daughter of a friend of mine. Words like "passed away" don't work in situations

like that. Vague words about harps and clouds and “better places” don’t work and neither do platitudes about how death is just a “normal” part of life.

Standing out in the cold August rain it was crystal clear to me that death is exactly what the New Testament describes it as: our final enemy.

Those are the situations where it is crystal clear that we need a victor, a Saviour. We need a strong and sure hope. We need to be reassured that God has not set eternity in our hearts for no reason.

And this is what Christians have proclaimed for the last two millennia. That Christ has put all things—even death—under his feet. That there is hope for newness and wholeness, for justice and peace. That we can be with Christ in eternity.

In a few minutes you’re going to be invited to come up here and light a candle in honour of someone that you have loved and lost.

As you come, there is sadness, I know. But I hope that there is also great joy and hope as well. We don’t light these candles purely as tokens of sadness but as declarations of the hope to which we have been called.

For those we have lost who were in Christ, we have confidence that they are with him.

For those we have lost who had little interest in Christ, we know that it is a dangerous thing for us to place limits on the mercy of God. I don’t say this to in any way trivialize the importance of the decisions that we make on earth. But it is God alone who judges. It is God alone is truly just and merciful. We must never forget this.

We have been called by God to an indescribable hope.

May our living and loving, our mourning and remembering, and ultimately our dying bear witness to this hope.

Amen.