

First Trinity Lutheran Church
November 11, 2007
Job 19:23-27
2 Thessalonians 2:1-5. 13-17
Luke 20:27-38

Honoring God after you Die

Last Sunday I said that this month we were going to talk about our own death. How do we prepare for that event? Why would we want to? I also told you that the process of preparing for your death begins by examining what you value. What is it about life that is important to you? Once you know what that is then you can use that to prepare. Other way to look at this is by saying to yourself what do I want to be remembered for? Some might say that after I'm gone does it matter what anybody thinks about me? Maybe it doesn't in some respects but if we looked at our lives as a contribution to the world around us then all of us have a legacy to leave after we are physically gone. Leaving a legacy takes planning. It just doesn't happen. And certainly people will not do it for you. So my friends we need to spend some time in legacy planning.

I approach this subject with some excitement because I believe that some of the information I have assembled can be helpful to all of you, and as your pastor I want to be helpful. But I also can imagine that some of you are thinking, this talk of death is really rather morbid and I have no interest in being connected with a church that even for a short time is going to focus on death. How do we live with dying? What hope does our Christian faith offer for the real anguish of death? Most of us resent the weak version of Christian hope, spoken at funerals "He/she is happy in heaven." That can't make up for the injustice of death by evildoers. It can't make up for sudden loss, or for agonizing months of pain. And weak explanations may even eat away at the foundation of our faith.

All three of the Bible readings for this Sunday after Pentecost, Job 2 Thessalonians, and Luke point to ways in which God's faithfulness and love reaches beyond the experience of death. In each case, the subject of the speaker is death: Job suffers from afflictions he cannot understand, Paul is in prison for preaching the gospel, and Jesus is in Jerusalem just before his passion.

To whom are John, Paul and Job speaking to? Job's audience is well-intentioned friends who hope to console him by showing him that God is "right" to let him be afflicted. The trouble is that they can only imagine solutions, which make God "right" at the expense of Job's integrity and innocence. Yet Job has another audience, the God known as the *go'el*, the "Redeemer," who brings people out of slavery. Job wants to be vindicated but it will only happen after he is dead.

Paul's words are addressed to a community of believers that he loves. Believers that he helped to organize and has seen them through difficult times. Though Paul hopes he will be released from prison his anxiety is not for himself. Paul's concern is for those he leaves behind. He will not be able to urge them to lead lives of holiness or hold fast to the truth of the gospel when he is gone. What will they have to live by? On a spiritual level, Paul expresses confidence in God's power to strengthen the community. On a more human level, he stresses the importance of remembering what they have learned from him, both in person and in his letters. Paul himself is about to pass into memory, to become part of "tradition." In short Paul is planning his legacy.

Jesus' audience is hostile. The Sadducees rejected the belief that God would raise up the righteous who had died. Appealing to the OT Jewish laws of marriage called levirate laws. The Sadducees want to show that this "resurrection belief" leads to absurd conclusions. As so often happens, Jesus challenges their assumptions. The Sadducees

assume that the same relationships and realities that hold on earth will prevail in the resurrection. Jewish marriage laws dealt with the human need to provide an heir for the deceased in order to maintain family order and property. Anyone who has ever been the executor of an estate understands the complexity of such relationships and the legal arrangements needed to be addressed.

None of these passages denies the painful consequences of death. However, they challenge the human responses, which block our perception of God's redemptive power. We cannot allow laws, social arrangements and psychological adaptations designed for this age to corrupt our vision of the one who is "not God of the dead, but of the living."

Many of us are familiar with Handel's *Messiah*. In the Messiah Job's affirmation of faith will be familiar: "I know that my redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand on the latter day upon the earth. And though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God." This text opens the third and final part of the oratorio that describes the Lamb's triumph over death and creation's miraculous rebirth when the last trumpet sounds.

The alto soloist sings "'Death is swallowed up in victory,' Death is everywhere, and in everything thing, which makes the promise of a new life so wonderful and beautiful.

In the life of the early church, Christians were looking forward to the end of the world—what theologians refer to as the eschaton or apocalypse—that would lead to the age of resurrection when the dead would be raised. Two thousand years later, we are not sure what to make of the Bible's descriptions of what will happen at Christ's second coming, nor do we know when the world as we know it will end. But in November, thanks to days such as the All Saints Day we have the opportunity to see, experience, and talk about the profound mystery of life and death, material and spiritual, day and night, human and divine. In this day and age, how do we proclaim our knowledge that Christ is alive? One way is to

spend the time now while we are living to plan for our legacy and how our legacy will continue to witness to the love of Christ in our hearts well after we are gone.

As the liturgical year winds down, the Gospel readings in the weeks ahead address our deepest fears and offer profound hope. Today Jesus speaks of God as a God of the living, who promises that the ones who will rise will be God's children. Next week the readings speak of the persecutions that will precede the return of the Son of Man, with the promise to Jesus' disciples that "not a hair on your head will be destroyed." The feast of Christ the King shows Jesus offering salvation and paradise at the moment of his death. And today, as a nation, we celebrate Veterans' Day with special memory of those who have laid down their lives for others.

So many people who don't know Christ's promise are bowed over in grief, but the scriptures appointed for these Sundays in November offer hope. Separated spouses will live together as sons and daughters of the resurrection. Fidelity and trust in God nurture a hope stronger than brutal power of evil governments, terrorist, and criminals whether the year is 165 B.C. or A.D. 2007. The readings also summon us who live in this age to be sons and daughters of God and of the resurrection. This past year Luke has unfolded his story of Jesus for us each Sunday and it ends with Jesus on the cross, promising paradise. But the story doesn't end there it continues as the risen Jesus breaks bread with people like the pilgrims on the way to Emmaus. We too are on a journey, a journey that will end, but when we have no idea. Our love for life, family, and our God does not have to end with our death especially if we have planned for our legacy. So I urge all of you to work through this book. Plan your estate, plan for your funeral, and plan for how you want to honor your Lord and Savior after you have gone from this earthly life to eternal life. Amen.