

“Singing our faith at life’s end”

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Reflection I: “God is our shepherd, we shall not want.”

Today we remember our loved ones who have died. They have left a gapping hole in our lives and in our hearts. We may also grieve those who’ve died seeking justice and peace in our world, or others who were formative in our lives, whether we knew them personally or not. We grieve together and hold each other in love. We sing hymns of assurance and faith. Today we are “singing our faith at life’s end.” The hymns today are among those Jacqui, my siblings, and I sang to my Mom in her last weeks. Perhaps you’ve sung the same songs for a love one at life’s end.

Some of us have lost dear family members this year. Grief at times knows no bounds. Today is especially emotional for me because in three months this summer, three dear beloved ones died. My family and I feel their absence daily. My mom and my aunt lived long joy- and love-filled lives; they died at 88 and 89 years old surrounded by their loving families singing hymns. Although my mom and my aunt were faithful and devoted followers of Jesus from cradle to grave, their individual experience of faith when facing death were quite distinct.

Perhaps their end-of-life journeys are representative of many others, ours included.

Aunt Elaine (my dad’s only sibling) embraced her life’s end with a joyous smile and comfortable conversations about death. She rejoiced in the life-long love of her family and in the strength of her faith. Reciting Psalm 23 was a strong proclamation for her: “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.... Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

For some, this Psalm is a sturdy statement of faith at life’s end.

In contrast, my mom frequently struggled to smile and affirm her faith during her last months. The last part of her life’s journey was plagued with anxiety and doubt. She tearfully confided to me “I know I should be trusting Jesus, but sometimes I can’t.” For mom singing the hymn “you are all we have, you give us what we need; our lives are in your hands O Lord” was at times a desperate cry for help and a plea for strength to face her overwhelming uncertainty

and doubt. Even so, singing hymns of faith did provide her with rest and assurance during her difficult and anxious journey....

For some, faith at life's end is fragile.

My third loved one who died this summer was our brother Al Armstrong, who ended his life after a long struggle with severe anxiety and depression. A death by suicide makes grief so much more complicated; the tears are also filled with anger, guilt, regret, and much more. There are no easy words of assurance, yet I fully trust and believe that God weeps with those in such horrible pain and holds them tightly, lovingly, at their life's end in God's grace-filled embrace.

Let's read Psalm 23 together in unison. It's in the bulletin. Then we will sing "you are all we have" and "take thou my hand o Father."

Whether you imagine yourself, or a loved one, at life's end in a time of strong faith or anxious doubt – or a blend of both – know that the Transcendent Mystery that we name "God" surrounds us in God's embrace.

Psalm 23

God is our shepherd, we shall not want. God makes us lie down in green pastures;

God leads us beside still waters; God restores our soul.

God leads us in right paths for God's name's sake.

Even though we walk through the darkest valley, we fear no evil;

for you God are with us; your rod and your staff — they comfort us.

You prepare a table before us in the presence of our enemies;

you anoint our head with oil; our cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives,

and we shall dwell in the house of God, our whole life long.

You are all we have – STJ 29

Take thou my hand, O Father – HWB 581

Reflection II: "Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's"

2000 years ago the Apostle Paul wrote letters to the followers of Jesus in Corinth and in Rome. In these letters he speaks powerful truth about life and death. Paul's words bring me to warm tears of faith for life's end. In I Corinthians, at the end of a long defense of bodily

resurrection that is rooted in his Jewish apocalyptic faith, Paul encapsulates his thought and even universalises it with the poetic lines that are core to our faith: “Where, O death, is your victory? Where is your sting? [For] the sting of death is sin.” Paul insists almost victoriously that what makes death sting is not that life is over. No, the penetrating sting is not due to the end, but rather for a life still bearing the weight of sin.

I understand sin – both personal sin and social sin – as broken relationships: brokenness among family and community, brokenness in relationship with marginalised people, brokenness with creation. So, at the end of life, death stings when brokenness and unresolved relationships dominate. And the more unresolved the brokenness, the more death stings.

So Paul is declaring that death does not sting after a life of faithfulness to Jesus, one filled with God’s love and mercy. Let’s be clear here – Paul is not referring to our grief and sadness in saying good-bye to our loved ones, or facing our own end of life. Rather, Paul is saying that empirically and theologically death stings when life was lived in unresolved brokenness. Hear Paul’s words in I Corinthians, chapter 15: 54b-57.

Then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’

‘Where, O death, is your victory?’

Where, O death, is your sting?’

The sting of death is sin ... but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote these words to the Corinthians early in his ministry, perhaps around the year 52 CE. Then about ten years later, at the end of his life-work, he wrote the letter to the Jesus followers in Rome. In Romans, Paul’s reflections on life and death have taken a different tone. He now focuses on whom we belong to. He proclaims that in life we live with Christ, and in death we die with Christ. “Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” I want to say that again; let’s allow these words from Paul wash over us: “Whether we live or whether we die, we are in Christ Jesus; we belong to God.” In the words of the hymn we sang earlier: “you are all we have, you give us what we need; our lives are in your hands O Lord, our lives are in your hands.”

Hear the words from Paul, Romans chapter 14: 7-9: We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then,

whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

In the bulb there is a flower – HWB 614

Remembering our loved ones: Congregational flower ritual

My life flows on – HWB 580

Reflection III: “Blessed are you”

We mourn, we grieve, and we weep. We feel viscerally the hole in our lives that our loved ones have left. Yet “no storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that rock I’m clinging.” That rock is God, whom we know in Jesus. And Jesus said we are blessed when we mourn.... “Blessed are you who mourn.” The Beatitudes from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount may not be a usual Eternity Sunday scripture. Yet I think they fit well. We have heard from the Apostle Paul that in Christ, death is not longer the victor; that in Christ, death has no sting, that death does not sting after a life filled with love and mercy. We also believe that in life we live with Christ, and in death we die with Christ. Paul wrote: “Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” I feel deeply that Jesus’ words of “you are blessed, you are happy when ...” describe the life of his followers – in life and in death. The beatitudes describe life and death in Christ.

Let’s read the Beatitudes together. Turn to HWB #834. We will read Matt. 5: 1-16 antiphonally....

We will end our Eternity Sunday service with two hymns.

- In thee is gladness – HWB 114
- Precious Lord, take my hand – HWB 575