

Untitled (40)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 September 2015

[0:00] Solid Red to start recording. Let us pray.

Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight. Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

In case you hadn't noticed already, Bishop Dave is a very persuasive man. He's got a real knack for delegating work. Either leaving projects on internet message, email messages, or leaving them here on the altar and asking somebody to just pick them up.

He's been very successful at this. For example, I understand that at a recent vestry meeting, he pointed out that he was going to be gone today, recreating with his family in Alaska, and somebody would need to cover the sermon.

Well, you can just picture now the vestry sitting around drawing straws to determine who was going to get stuck with this stuff. It was unanimous.

[1:22] I can't believe they drew any straws. I can't believe they drew any straws either. So I received an email in which the bishop said that the vestry had asked him to ask me to do today's sermon.

I think the bishop said, let's ask Rutgers. He's just dying for the opportunity to do this. Bishop Dave learned the art of persuasion from Bishop Dan Herzog when he served together in the Diocese of Albany.

Bishop Dan had a very disarming way of collaring people that he was trying to encourage, to get him to volunteer for things, and as he would talk to you, he would be nodding his head like this. And pretty soon you found yourself nodding your head, and you were hooked. This is not a theological talk. My credentials for being in the pulpit are very slim.

I've had no conversion experience. I grew up in a Christian home. I've always been a believer. I didn't know what it was to not be a believer. And I accept Holy Scripture at face value.

[2:39] I don't sit around pondering it. I don't nitpick it to try to figure out what is believable and what isn't. I just accept it. And that may not be too intellectual, but it's kept my life a lot simpler.

In June, I shared some thoughts with you about transition. In this case, it was the transition of the Church of the Holy Trinity between Rutgers.

And what a blessing that time can be. And I've seen that in the time that Bishop Dave has been here. He's very gently led us into some new traditions.

He's also very gently revived some old ones. Today, I'd like to share a few thoughts on a different kind of transition. Lately, I've been thinking a lot about death.

Not usually an especially cheerful subject. But when you get to be my age, and a few of you may be a bit older here, you begin to become more aware of your mortality.

[3:53] You lose friends and acquaintances with increased regularity. And some of us even have adopted the daily ritual of checking the obituaries in the newspaper to see whether her name happens to be there.

Recently, Sally and I realized that we had three close friends under hospice care. Two weeks ago, we attended the funeral of one in Schenectady. So that has brought the whole matter of death, especially close to us.

This morning, I'd like to look at the transition from life to death from three different perspectives. First, how the world looks at death. Then what the Bible has to say about it.

And finally, how it impacts us here at Church of the Holy Trinity. How does the world view death? Quite simply, we're born and we die. And in between, we seek to have fulfilling, satisfying, happy lives and try not to dwell too much on what happens next.

[5:00] We're surrounded by both life and death, but we tend to concentrate on life. That's because it's a more joyous thing to think about and it's something we understand much better.

We have no memory of before we were. And only scant information about what happens next. As Christians, we've been given some pretty good expectations, but it's really hard to wrap our minds around the whole idea of what happens next.

Like doubting Thomas, we'd really like to see and feel what is ahead. At the same time, the world has taught us that the thought of death is unpleasant.

But it's unavoidable. Television, radio, newspapers are full of information about drive-by shootings, terrorist activities around the world, refugees running for their lives trying to get out of Syria, for example.

ISIS beheadings. It never stops. We are conditioned to view death in very negative ways. As a soldier for 30 years, I saw my share of death.

[6:21] I was trained and trained others to both directly and indirectly kill and avoid death.

Leading others into battle. Directing the fire of artillery and heavy weapons. Calling in airstrikes and participating in hand-to-hand combat. While I didn't delight in doing these things, it was my profession.

And I believe in the larger picture it was within my Christian calling. A couple of nights ago when I was giving Sally a pre-brief on this lay witness, she reminded me of our meeting in Hawaii in 1969 when I was on R&R in Vietnam for five days.

I had recently been wounded, hospitalized, and was still recuperating. We attended chapel on Sunday, and the priest's sermon, ironically, was on death.

Certainly inappropriate, but not a very cheerful subject for those of us returning to war and our families who were returning to the home front. So while we have death all around us, it's still uncomfortable to dwell on the subject, and we work pretty hard to avoid it.

[7:36] It's certainly true that none of us are going to get out of here alive. But that really doesn't help us to think about what happens next. I wonder about the unbelievers who see nothing beyond this life.

We all have acquaintances, perhaps even family members, that fall into this category. I can't imagine what it must be like to be facing a future that is nothing more than a hole in the ground.

So what does the Bible have to say about death? A lot. In fact, so much that I had to turn to the internet for help because we don't have a concordance or a study Bible at our cottage.

So I Googled on the question. What does the Bible say about death? Try that when you get home. I think you'll find it very interesting. There are tons of answers.

I suspect that some of the references were even written by non-believers. Except for the testimony of some of the prophets, most of what we read about death in the Old Testament is pretty gruesome and without hope.

[8:44] The New Testament, of course, is another matter. Here are a few things that I found on the internet that seem to provide some reassurance that there's something good beyond the here and now.

I Googled on www.gotquestions.org and asked, what about death? Answer. The Bible presents death as separation.

Physical death is the separation of the soul from the body. And spiritual death is the separation of the soul from God. Death is the result of sin.

Romans tells us that. The wages of sin is death. But the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus. The whole world is subject to death because all have sinned.

By one man, sin entered the world. And so death passed upon all men for that all have sinned. In Genesis, the Lord warned Adam that the penalty for disobedience would be death.

[9:49] You will surely die, he said. When Adam disobeyed, he experienced immediate spiritual death. That caused him to hide from the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

Later, Adam experienced physical death. On the cross, Jesus also experienced physical death. Hebrews tells us that the difference is that Adam died because he was a sinner.

And Jesus, who had never sinned, chose to die as a substitute for sinners. Jesus then showed his power over death and sin by rising from the death on the third day.

Because of Christ, death is a defeated foe. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? As recorded in 1 Corinthians. For the unsaved, death brings to an end the chance to accept God's gracious offer of salvation.

Hebrews states, It is appointed unto man once to die, but after this, the judgment. 2 Corinthians and Philippians tell us, For the saved, death ushers us into the presence of Christ.

[11:04] To be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord. Both 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians report that so real is the promise of the believer's resurrection.

That the physical death of a Christian is called sleep. And in Revelation, we look forward to that time when there shall be no more death.

On to www.bible.org. So heaven is our eternal home. Our Lord is there. Our friends and loved ones in Christ are there.

There is no sin nor sinful nature there to cause unhappiness. Death for the believer is not a venture into the unknown or a strange or alien atmosphere.

It's like going home. But it is even more wonderful than that because it is a home in God's presence. And from www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com Therefore, barring divine intervention, death will come to everyone.

[12:19] Unbelievers who remain in their unbelief have only judgment and condemnation in their destiny. However, the Christian has a completely different destiny to look forward to.

For the believer, death is the beginning of a wonderful new experience with God. The death of our mortal bodies is simply the door through which we must pass to gain entrance into this heavenly realm.

As recorded in Hebrews, someday Jesus will come back with the believers who have already joined him in heaven for the believers still on earth.

So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time. Not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly awaiting for him.

Then we will be able to say with the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians, when the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying, death is swallowed up in victory.

[13:24] Oh death, where is your victory? Oh death, where is your sting? So we're here at Church of the Holy Trinity.

And how do we view death? Well, there are a number of us who are already well above the life expectancy of you young folks. The parish has lost family members and friends over the last year, and we'll probably lose more next year.

I say lose in the sense that their passing into eternal life seems to be a loss to us, but certainly not to them. Are we ready spiritually for the next step?

Or do we still have work to do? Do we have a sure and certain assurance of eternal life? Or do we have some nagging fears and uncertainties?

On the physical side, do we keep our affairs in order so that our passing won't be a burden to our families and others? Despite gospel assurances to the contrary, I'll admit to still being a bit of a coward about the whole process.

[14:35] I'm really not ready to go. And I'm banking on my mother's genes to give me a couple more decades before making the big transition. She lived to be 102, and I'd like to top that.

Also, it would give me time to get my own spiritual act together. I recognize that my lay witness may have opened a can of worms, but I'm confident that when Bishop Dave returns, we'll sort all of this out for you.

Amen. Amen. Amen.