

Preparing for Remembering, Remembering to Prepare

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October 31, 2010

Genesis 23:1-4, 17-20, Sarah's death

Gen 49:1, 28-33 Jacob's death

Matthew 26:26-29 The last supper

Silently, a flower blooms,
In silence it falls away;
Yet here now, at this moment, at this place,
The world of the flower, the whole of
the world is blooming.
This is the talk of the flower, the truth
Of the blossom;
The glory of eternal life is fully shining here.
Zenkei Shibayama

As a congregation we don't interact much with death, (the bloom falling away) except for our annual tradition of observing All Saints Day with a sung requiem, which we will do next week. We have a lot more baby dedications than we do funerals. While at some churches the busiest committee is the funeral meal committee, here that is a cushy position. You may not be called on for three or more years.

But as individuals, many of us know illness and death — intimately. In the past year alone, seven of us have lost a parent; some went suddenly while some lingered in pain for years. And many more have lost grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and friends.

At this time of year, we see the dying process all around us in nature. We know the ache of loss as individuals. Do we need to dwell on it?

The book that tells our stories, the Bible, includes accounts of birth and death. Some of the death stories seem pretty fantastic and we tend to overlook

them. *All the days of Methuselah were 969 years; and he died. All the days of Lamech were 777 years; and he died.* Gen. 5:27, 31

But we also have stories about how death shapes families, how death shapes the living. Hear this moving story of the death of Sarah, the beloved first wife of Abraham.

Genesis 23: 1-4 Sarah lived for 127 years; this was the length of Sarah's life. ²And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. ³Abraham rose up from beside his dead, and said to the Hittites, ⁴'I am a stranger and an alien residing among you; give me property among you for a burying-place, so that I may bury my dead out of my sight.'

Thus ensues some bargaining, with a number of Hittites, for land and a cave.

17 So the field of Ephron in Machpelah, which was to the east of Mamre, the field with the cave that was in it and all the trees that were in the field, throughout its whole area, passed ¹⁸to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the Hittites, in the presence of all who went in at the gate of his city. ¹⁹After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah facing Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. ²⁰The field and the cave that is in it passed from the Hittites into Abraham's possession as a burying-place.

A few chapters later in Genesis we read that Abraham, after his death, was buried in this same cave, in what became the family burial ground.

The family story continues to unfold. We come to the end of Jacob's long life. He lays on his death bed and dispenses blessings (and curses) to each of his sons, as it says, *blessing each one with a suitable blessing.*

Gen 49:1, 28-33 *Then Jacob called his sons, and said: 'Gather around, that I may tell you what will happen to you in days to come.'*²⁹ *Then he charged them, saying to them, 'I am about to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my ancestors — in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite,'*³⁰ *in the cave in the field at Machpelah, near Mamre, in the land of Canaan, in the field that Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite as a burial site.'*³¹ *There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried; there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried; and there I buried Leah —*³² *the field and the cave that is in it were purchased from the Hittites.'*³³ *When Jacob ended his charge to his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed, breathed his last, and was gathered to his people.*

Jacob, knowing that he was going to die, prepared his sons. He blessed them, reminded them of the family story and where he was to be buried. And then he curled up on his bed, in a fetal position and stopped breathing.

One Sunday this past summer, as part of this series on the well-lived life, we heard from a number of people in the congregation about how they prepared for the death of a loved one and how those who were dying prepared themselves. Sometimes, like with Jacob and his family, we receive a blessing from a loved one before they die. Sometimes it is only after they are gone that we see the blessing we have been given.

This morning, we have the opportunity to stop for a short while and think about our own lives and eventual death. We certainly can't plan for death, but we can begin to think about how we want to be remembered, what kind of blessing we want to give those who will gather to remember.

This may feel uncomfortable. It may even feel inappropriate for children and youth. While we don't want to overwhelm children neither can we totally shield them from this mystery of life.

I clearly remember the day as a young teenager when I realized in a new way that people age and die. It began with a new appreciation and gratitude for my life, for my parents, for the family I was born into. What came next was the recognition that one day I would be a parent and my children would not know my parents as I did, as active and playful. My eventual children would only know my parents as *old people*. This realization, that I could never adequately pass on the intimate knowledge of my own family, brought a flood of tears and grief.

My parents were probably confused by the intense display of emotion that accompanied this revelation. But for me it was a profound spiritual insight. Had I known Psalm 103, I would have said with the psalmist,

*Our days on earth are like grass;
like wildflowers, we bloom and die.
The wind blows, and we are gone —
as though we had never been here.
But the love of God remains forever
with those who know God. (from Psalm 103)*

We have a tradition in this congregation of sharing our faith stories when we become members of this body. We give new members the almost impossible assignment of sharing, in five minutes or less, what a living faith looks like in their lives, how they got to that place, and what they find in this gathered community that nourishes and supports that lived faith. Part of what we are invited to this morning is to begin to think about the faith story we each want to pass on to the next generations, at our own funeral.

A funeral service is an occasion, in the Christian tradition, to reaffirm what the church teaches about life and death, about faith and doubt, love, hope and the body. Many times it is also a chance for the gathered community to hear the faith journey of the person who is no longer with us. It is the living witness of the one who is gone that inspires and challenges us to look at our own lives, at the journey we walk now.

The tradition has given us a very concrete way to remember Jesus. One memorable evening he and his disciples shared a Passover meal. Jesus might have said, “You know, this has really been fun, meaningful too. I hope next year when you have Passover you will remember that I was here with you because I have a feeling I won’t be here the next time.”

Thankfully, the story is told differently. We are given something very tangible as a way to remember Jesus. In a Seder meal there are numerous times that one ritually eats bread and drinks wine. Jesus transforms one part of the meal into a way for those gathered to remember him.

Matthew 26: 26-29 *While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.'*²⁷ *Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you;'*²⁸ *for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*²⁹ *I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.'*

In this scene, we are given a glimpse into the way Jesus understands himself and the world, how his followers came to understand his relationship to the tradition. After all these years, across miles and time it is through this story and this action that we are connected to Jesus and to each other in a new way. In fact, the mystifying thing is that the retelling of this story and the re-enacting of the meal connect us not only to Jesus but to those present, those past and those to come.

We can't determine how people will remember us, but we can help shape the memories through song and scripture. We can make suggestions about how we want to pass on the truths we are learning, the beauty and joy in which we live, those things that give us life. We can help shape the story that will witness to our life when we become members — of the company of souls and saints.

Perhaps this feels uncomfortable **and** confusing. Isn't it egotistical to think about how we want to be remembered? Isn't it prideful to want to be remembered in this way?

I hope not. Rather, I hope that thinking about our death helps us to live life to the fullest, live life with gratitude, and to think about how we want to share that gratitude with others. How **we live** leaves clues about what is important to us, about how we understand and appreciate life. But **writing it** down and filing it away, is a whole lot clearer for those who come after.

In your bulletin you find a sheet that is designed to help you think about preparing and remembering. These are just the basics; you can of course be as elaborate and specific as you like with hymns, scriptures, poems, musical selections. You might also ask, “How do I see life’s beauty? Who and what do I love? What gives me pleasure? What has fed and nourished me? What do I hope will feed and nourish others?”

It is hard to capture the elusive, the mysterious, the thing we can hardly name, but that has brought glimpses of peace, justice, joy, beauty and sounds of delight to our lives. How has your heart been opened to something bigger and beyond yourself?

As a way to remember, as a way to give thanks for life, I invite you to begin working with these questions and eventually talk about them with friends and family. As a way to begin to give some space for these thoughts, I will ask the band to come and play before the next hymn.

*Our days on earth are like grass;
like wildflowers, we bloom and die.
The wind blows, and we are gone —
as though we had never been here.*

But the love of God remains forever

with those who know God. (from Psalm 103)

Let us rejoice, bloom and live well — knowing that we are well-loved.