

Sunday, March 26, 2017

Psalm 23 (747VU)

Mark 5:35-43

Fear of Death and New Life

We continue our Lenten journey with our theme of “Freedom from Fear” and as stated a few weeks ago, in order to gain freedom from our fears, we need to name them. Today our focus is on the fear of death and what people of faith should believe regarding death and eternal life. It is my hope that as we reflect on the fear of death that those of us who have experienced the death of loved ones- whether in recent months or years gone by- that God’s Spirit will speak to you and comfort you as we talk about our faith, our belief in new life and this fear which comes to us when we are little children that is when we first encounter something- a bird, a pet, a fish dying. Our society today does not want to face death at all. After all we want to live forever because this life we have is all we know and enjoy. What comes next after leaving earth is only known by those who have gone before us and are living eternally with God.

What is it we are afraid of when we talk about fear of death? There is a distinct difference when we talk about fear of death and dying because it depends upon who is facing death. Thanatophobia is the fear of one’s own death whereas necrophobia is the fear of dead or dying persons or loss of things. So when we ask a person who is dying, are you afraid to die it is distinct from an individual who has difficulties understanding what no longer living means. But what is it that we fear for ourselves and others who are dying?

Mary was a woman who was dying of liver cancer. She taught me so much during the time leading up to her death. She was fairly young about 55, married to a nice man and they were very happy. She was a businesswoman and they had no children together but he had two from a previous marriage. I visited with her a few times but I received this message that she needed to talk to me right away. So when I arrived at the hospital room, she asked everyone to leave because she had to talk to me. Meanwhile she was putting on makeup and lipstick because she always wore make up and as she said, felt naked without it. She had lost her hair but her smile lit up the room. Her colour was awful and seeing her that day she wanted to ask me a very important question. It was, “How do I die?” Do I just lie here or fight it? Do I ask for everyone to leave or have everyone around me? What am I going to expect—I haven’t died before so I don’t know?” I had already talked about her funeral plans with her and her husband.

But it was the actual dying that she was afraid to ask about. And that is often the fear that is cited the most by many people. People want to die on their own terms, and even though they realize that not all their dreams would come true in this life, dying in peaceful circumstances is what this woman wanted the most and as she stated, "I want to do it right."

I answered her very simply. God will lead you to do it right for He is the one who will know the right moment to receive your spirit and God is watching over you all the time. When you are ready God will receive you and all those in the room with you will breathe again, and cry. She seemed ok with this answer. We prayed together and in less than 6 hours she died with her family around her, her makeup and nails perfect, and she was ready.

In our reading from Mark 5 the story of Jairus' daughter is told in two parts. In the first parts. One of the synagogue leaders, Jairus sees Jesus, falls at his feet and pleads earnestly with him by stating, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." So Jesus went with him. They were on their way to the Jairus' home and the crowd is getting larger as they walk along because the people in the streets have heard about him as a teacher and a healer. A woman who had been bleeding for 12 years saw Jesus and makes her way through the crowd towards Jesus. She believed that she only had to touch his robe and she would be healed. So she risks this and walks into the crowd and touches the hem of his robe. Jesus realized that power had gone out of him. He knew someone had touched him and stopped the movement of the crowd. He asked the crowd as to who had touched him. This woman then comes forward, falls at his feet and trembles in fear, not knowing what Jesus would say or do. She tells Jesus the truth because she had been healed because she touched Jesus' robe and because she believed. She was freed from suffering.

While this discussion is going on some men from Jairus' household tell the ruler that his daughter has died and then asks Jairus why he is bothering the teacher knowing that his worst fear is true- his daughter has died. But Jesus tells Jairus "Don't be afraid; just believe." Jairus, Jesus, Peter James and John make their way to Jairus' house. They see many people crying and wailing. Jesus asks them why they are crying because the child is only sleeping. The crowd laughs at him probably in disgust- their grief is real. Jesus then has everyone leave the house and then he takes the child's parents, and Peter, James and John with him into the room where the child was. He takes her by the hand- and says, "Little girl, I say to you, get up! The little girl

gets up and walks around the room. All were astonished. Jesus tells Jairus and his wife, Peter, James and John two things. 1) Don't tell anyone about this and 2) give her something to eat.

One can only imagine the roller coaster of emotions Jairus and his wife are feeling. Jairus is a ruler in the synagogue. A leader amongst the Jewish community and he is fearful that his 12 year old daughter will die. This is not how life is to be—children are not to die before parents but his daughter is very ill and dying. He is looking for someone who can help. He is looking beyond his own faith and community. Jairus has heard about Jesus and is aware of the concerns of the Pharisees and Sadducees about this man. He is an elder in the synagogue and yet he makes his way to where a crowd has gathered and where Jesus is coming to shore again. He goes to Jesus and out of respect, falls to his feet and pleads for her life. He asks her to come to his home, put his hands on her so that she will be healed. Jairus is known by the community and he has asked Jesus the teacher to heal his daughter. Was it out of desperation? Was it out of fear because of his possible future loss? Was it because he wondered about Jesus and this was a test? All we learn is that Jairus went to Jesus and pleaded for him to come and heal her. He believed Jesus could do something to help and those in the synagogue knew he had gone to see Jesus.

Jairus was afraid of death for his daughter. We fear death immensely. We don't like to think about it or talk about it and we spend thousands of dollars trying to avoid it. But Jesus teaches us that we are to be free from this fear for he shows us that in the face of death, there is hope, peace and life. In this story, we rejoice that the little girl is raised to life but we know of so many other stories that do not end this way. Not every child lives and every one in turn will die. There is pain and death and sorrow which plays out in our lives. We must remember that Jesus does not promise that there will be no death, but gives us hope so there is no need to be afraid of that moment when it comes.

Just reflect on this a moment—when a baby is to be born, the child cannot stay in its mother forever. There is moment when that baby has no choice but to yield to be welcomed into the world and for that infant, it is an unknown. When that baby is born there is joy in the room—parents, family, doctors, nurses and staff. Music is played in the hallways of the hospital telling us of a newborn infant in our world. There is only one crying—the baby who fills its lungs with air for the first time and lets out a scream to say, "I'm here!"

Paul writes in “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (I Cor 15:55) A bee can only sting a person once but it can still frighten us when the stinger is gone, it can do no damage. Jesus removed the sting of death when he died, we are only needing to realize that what we really fear is the act of dying and whether we will have grace to face our exit victoriously, that is what will happen at that moment when a person dies. Will the situation be like this: a room filled with crying and hugging going on; there is peace and contentment on their face? What is occurring in that moment between life and death? The words of Philippians 3:20-21 can be claimed by the loved one who has died as “they become a citizen of heaven and Christ enables all to bring everything under his control and transform us so that they will be like his glorious body. A body fit for heaven.” It is through grace that this moment is made possible by God. Grace is a gift from God to help us to move from one relationship to another. We say it is by the grace of God that we can face all things including death itself. Psalm 73:24 states, “God’s counsel you will be guide and afterward your will be receive by God into glory.” And this grace, often referred to as dying grace is given when you will need it.

When Corrie ten Boom was a girl, her first experience with death came after visiting the home of a neighbour who had just died. When she thought of the fact that her parents would die someday, her father comforted her by asking, When we go to Amsterdam, when do I give you your ticket? She responded, “Just before we get on the train.” Exactly, and so will God will give you exactly what you need when you die- dying grace. You will be sorrowful and the need to grieve will occur, but when that moment comes you will be ready and you have nothing to fear if you have faith and believe and abide with God.

So how do we combat this fear of death? There are practical, physical and spiritual steps to endure. Practically is when a person is told to get their life in order—paperwork, wills, money matters and even preparing for funeral expenses. Physically is if one become incapacitated or unable to make decisions for themselves it is important to have a living will with advanced directives. Spiritually is when one is able to not dwell upon what you will miss here on earth, but to focus on Jesus Christ as the one who made it possible to receive the gift of eternal life and to accept God’s grace as we live and as we die. And in the meantime- we are to live for Christ, to fulfill the call to serve one another in love and hope, to share in ministry as we tell the good news story of eternal life beyond this life.

We are to live for Christ as Paul states in Philippians 1:21 “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain, But if I am to live on in the flesh this will mean fruitful labour for me, and I do not know which to choose.” Paul stats, “Live or die I win because of Christ Jesus.”

Let us not have fear of death- because Jesus brings hope, peace, and life even to the darkest of places, and yet His light will shine if we believe and abide with him. God is with us; in life and death and life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God