



Death & Dying: A Lenten Presentation **The First Sunday in Lent + February 7, 2021**

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The topic of death is not a comfortable one in our society; I give this presentation knowing that and with great gratitude that all of you present have decided to walk alongside me as I ruminate on something so many of us fear and try and put from our minds. I hope to approach this topic with gentleness and honesty, and if at any point it is a journey you would rather not take, please feel free to leave the talk. This is a heavy topic.

It is natural, I think, to fear death. It is a great unknown which threatens to stretch out before us infinitely, a great darkness. I certainly understood it this way when I was a child and first became cognizant of it. I still remember the moment when I first conceptualized death. I was sitting on the foot of my parent's bed, probably a 3- or 4-year-old, and I asked my dad, "Will I die?"

He hesitated, not knowing what to say.

After a long pause, he murmured, "Yes."

"Will you die? Will mom die?"

Another long pause.

"Yes."

I cried inconsolably that night, imagining everything around me—my bed, pillows, beloved stuffed animals, home, everyone I loved—being vacuumed up into a great, unending abyss. It felt like a cruel reality which had been sitting right under my nose had been revealed to me and all hope was gone. Like most people do, I grew up coping with death largely by ignoring it. I did not experience much death in my immediate family and this made it easy to be young, silly, and irreverent towards the Spector of Death, which I had once found so frightening. I have now, as a 25-year-old, experienced substantial loss. And yet, I can't help but feel that the grief I've experienced is set apart from grappling with my own death. Grief, of course, beckons death forward. Rather than lingering in the recesses, death is illuminated and present to the griever. Grieving someone often brings up questions like: "What is the meaning of life? Why is life so fleeting?" And "When will I die?"

But, at least for me, the contours of grief for a loved one are different than my own grief that I will one day die. When I lost my stepfather to suicide, I felt a hole inside of me where he had been. This hole was shaped like him, it belonged to him and the particularity of who he was and who he was to me. His death made me more aware of my own eventual death, but more than anything it was an absence of his life in mine. As I have gone on living, he has not gone on living with me; this is a peculiar kind of pain, and one which is different from the pain that he has died. I make this distinction because I think it is an important one in grappling with our own perceptions of death.

I do not think that death is the mere absence of life. If anything, my Christian faith calls me to see beyond this way of thinking. Christianity points me beyond the bounds of the binary "life" and "death" distinction and dips me into far more mysterious and murky waters.

Jesus tells us that our “fathers ate manna in the wilderness, and they died”¹ but that we are not beholden to the same fate. Through his sacrifice, we are granted eternal life. Jesus tells the disciples, “whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”²

As we partake in the eucharist each Sunday, we are reminded of both death and life simultaneously. Through the consumption of Jesus’s body and blood, his sacrifice is made real to us. We are reminded not only that Jesus died, but that he died violently, painfully. We are not asked to look away from his death, but to recount it, continually. This is no easy task. In every way, we are begged to witness Jesus’s suffering. For, “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.”³ Only in this act of witnessing and abiding in the pain of sacrifice and death can we separate ourselves from the flesh and find the Spirit.⁴

Jesus asks of us that which can be so challenging in our own, everyday lives. That we contemplate death; that we sit with suffering; and that, in witnessing the suffering and death of others, we become aware of our own end. Jesus’s promise of eternal life does not negate the trials of death. To have faith in God, in the kingdom of heaven, and eternal life is not enough to alleviate the pains of death which even Jesus faced. It does not mean we are not afraid. It does not mean it is easy, gentle, or frictionless.

This is made all the more challenging in the elusive nature of heaven. Jesus tells us that his “Father’s house has many rooms”⁵ and that a place has been prepared for us in this house; heaven is described throughout the Bible as a city, a kingdom, a wedding banquet; while each image may bring us a sense of comfort and familiarity, the true nature of heaven remains elusive. As creatures obsessed with comfort and predictability, it can be difficult to grapple with this mystery. Throughout history, artists and poets have attempted to render the incomprehensible. There are innumerable depictions of heaven in oil, sculpture, and relief. In some, God is seated on a golden throne, a halo around his head. In others, winged Angels descend from heaven, a kingdom out of sight in the clouds. Dante painted his own version of heaven in words, cementing his vision in the Christian canon. In his vision, concentric spheres surround the earth, each containing different souls, the best of which abide with God in the outermost Empyrean sphere. Unlike Dante, we cannot be lead through the depths of Hell, ascend through Purgatory, and gaze upon the wonders of Paradiso, at least not while living. For, as Jesus tells us, “No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended, the Son of Man.”⁶

We are left, then, in holy mystery. An uncomfortable place to be for many of us. As I have found myself in this place, I have struggled to find the proper framing for my own death or in comprehending the deaths of those I love. For now, I will offer you this not as a theological claim, but as an attempt at comprehending, at loving, and at embracing fear. I imagine death as a kind of re-birth, as uncomfortable and painful as the first birth which brought me into this world. Just as the mother cries out in her birth pangs, the loving order of family and friends who surround us in this life cry out in their grief at our loss. Like a midwife, Jesus helps us along into heaven, a landscape so incomprehensible that we are as helpless in its presence as a newborn child in the vast and overwhelming expanse of this world. New and unending life; this is what we are offered.

¹ John 6: 49

² John 6: 54

³ John 6: 56

⁴ John 6: 63: “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless.”

⁵ John 14: 2

⁶ John 3: 13

In other versions of this metaphor, I have imagined the griever as the midwife; in our mourning, anointing, and memorializing, are we not beckoning forth the soul into heaven? Is our task not solemn and yet joyous? We do not mistake the cries of the child and the mother as a sign of something terrible, but as a necessary part of new life. New, unending life.

I would like to leave by offering up some questions for reflection and discussion and then offering some silence, some space for rumination, and lastly a prayer before beginning a discussion. Some of these questions may be best reflected upon privately, and others together. I will leave it up to you to decide how best to reflect.

What do you fear about death?

How do you imagine heaven?

Does the image of the midwife speak to you?

I welcome reflections unrelated to these questions. Whatever comes to you.

O God our King, by the resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ on the first day of the week, you conquered sin, put death to flight, and gave us the hope of everlasting life: Redeem all our days by this victory; forgive our sins, banish our fears, make us bold to praise you and to do your will; and steel us to wait for the consummation of your kingdom on the last great Day; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

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