

If I Should Die Before I Wake

John 14:1-4; Revelation 21:1-6

All Saints Sunday (Nov. 5) 2023

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Let us pray: O God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for you are our strength and our redeemer.

Amen.

The bedtime ritual in my early childhood never varied. One parent or the other tucked me in, listened to me about various things on my mind – which were plenty and could have stretched on into the night if they had allowed. Then it was time for the bedtime prayer.

“Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

Then the prayer continued – God bless Mom and Daddy, Jay (my toddler brother), grandparents on both sides, aunts, uncles, cousins – all who lived nearby in our small town – various church people, and perhaps a neighbor or two, and some of my friends. Sometimes, if I could work it in quickly and quietly, I’d include the Stamford Bulldogs high school football team.

Looking back, I’ve learned that prayer was a small All Saints celebration. For more than a thousand years, the Christian church has remembered and given God thanks, on November 1 and the first Sunday following Nov. 1, “for all the

saints who from their labors rest.” Not stained-glass window saints, by the way, but all the saints.

Dean Lueking, Lutheran pastor and theologian, said, “Saints are not celebrities. Saints are forgiven sinners, who know it, act upon it, and live by grace without angling for stained-glass window status” (*The Christian Century*, 10/21/98, “Saints in the Making”). Saints, Lueking says, are public school teachers, hospital emergency room nurses, dedicated spouses and parents, nursing home workers, volunteers, office clerks, accountants, construction workers, engineers, and all sorts of day-to-day people – all of whom are forgiven sinners who live by grace.

A term I’ve used before that I got from the great Baptist preacher, Carlyle Marney, who said that saints are your balcony people – the people now gone who have influenced and inspired you and helped form your faith and values, and who continue to cheer you on from the balcony. All Saints is the day to walk out in the front yard, look up to your balcony, and wave at your saints.

So, my earliest prayer concluded with a recitation of saints. And it was also, I now understand, a theological affirmation of more than I could understand and which I’m still living into. I began to learn from my earliest days how to begin to think about death in this prayer.

The late Henri Nouwen, not long before his own untimely death, wrote a wonderful little book, *Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Death and Dying*, prompted by the death of a resident of the L’Arche Community, where Nouwen was working. Nouwen urges us to come to terms, even befriend our own death, “We can live as if this life were all we had, as if death were absurd and we better

not talk about it, or we can choose to claim our divine childhood . . . becoming a child-entering a second childhood is essential to dying a good death.”

The topic is not easy. On one hand it gets complicated because the Bible talks about two different versions of death. On one hand, Death can be a power all its own that seeks to destroy, diminish, and dominate. Yet, death can also be a servant of God, as God intended – the entrance into eternal life, and the end of all suffering. Beyond that, the Bible does not give us many specifics. In fact, the Bible has a whole lot less to say than the preachers who, Reinhold Niebuhr once quipped, “seem to know everything there is to know about the furniture of heaven, the temperature of hell, and the guest list of both places.” There is an internal wisdom in the Bible, it seems, that wants to leave this matter of what happens to us when we die to faith, trust, and hope.

Our first Scripture lesson is from John, “In my Father’s house are many dwelling places,” or “In my Father’s house is a lot of room.” Our second is from Revelation, “He will wipe away my tears. Death will be no more.”

The context in both cases is critical. “In my Father’s house” comes at the end, when Jesus is about to be arrested and crucified. The disciples do not know what is to become of him or themselves. His words are minimal but reassuring . . . “in my Father’s house are many rooms. Do not be afraid.”

The beautiful words from Revelation were written by an old man in the midst of one of the fiercest, cruelest periods of persecution the Christian church has ever experienced. Old John was a political prisoner on the Island of Patmos. In a small cell, chained to the rocks, with a small window where he could see the beautiful blue Mediterranean Sea and sky that he looked out at as he addressed small, hanging-on-by-their-fingernails Christian churches. Under siege, their

numbers decimated by political arrests and public executions, their very existence in grave doubt before the invincible and hostile power of Rome. “God will wipe away every tear. Death will be no more.”

Marney, whom I mentioned a moment ago, used to say that most of the time, we don’t think about death very much. But when we’re facing our own death or the death of someone we’re close to, then we reflect more than ever on death and resurrection.

We live by faith and trust. We listen to Scripture, we pray, and we trust. We learn to trust God – it’s a lifelong journey learning to trust. We also listen and learn to trust one another. We encourage one another.

Kathleen Norris’ has a wonderful essay on Heaven in her book, *Amazing Grace*: Heaven is “a foolish concept to be sure,” she writes. And she goes on to say that she loves the “utter democracy of the heavenly banquet,” and describes a dream she once had, “a banquet table so long I could not see the end of it. Emily Dickinson seated next to St. Therese of Lisieux, Soren Kierkegaard seated across from them. I longed to hear the conversation. My grandparents were there, my aunts and uncles, my mother and father, family, friends, strangers. A whole raft of Dali Lamas, including the current one, and several infant Lamas-to-be. Seated not far from them was a good friend, a Benedictine monk. He was grouching about having to wear his habit for all eternity. There was much lively conversation, but it all sounded like singing and was profoundly joyful. I awoke with a sense of wonder at the grace of it all” (*Amazing Grace*, p. 367).

Death, dying, and heaven, the hope of the resurrection is all a mystery finally and we can only say, “We don’t know.” Yet a mystery that is good for us to occasionally talk about with one another.

Henri Nouwen imagines twins having a conversation in the womb, which might encourage us to think creatively about death.

“The sister said to her brother, ‘I believe there is life after birth.’ Her brother protested vehemently. ‘No, no, this is all there is. This is a dark and cozy place, and we have nothing else to do but cling to the cord that feeds us.’ The little girl insisted, ‘There must be something else, a place with light where there is freedom to move.’ She could not convince her twin brother.

After some silence, the sister said hesitantly, ‘I have something else to say and I’m afraid you won’t believe that, either, but I think there is a mother!’ He shouted, ‘What are you talking about? I have never seen a mother and neither have you. Who put that idea into your head? This place is all we have’”

The sister was quite overwhelmed. But she couldn’t let go of her thought, and finally she said, ‘Don’t you feel these squeezes every once in a while? They’re quite unpleasant and sometimes even painful.’ ‘Yes,’ he answered. ‘What’s special about that?’ ‘Well,’ the sister said, ‘I think that these squeezes are to get us ready for another place, much more beautiful than this, where we will see our mother face-to-face. Don’t you think that’s exciting?’” (Nouwen, p. 19-20).

Finally, you and I decide to live as if this is all there is, or we decide, with a faith that is childlike, to live as if we are finally and ultimately secure in God’s love, which means free to live this life fully, joyfully, passionately.

It is no accident, I believe, that Jesus did not say very much about the specifics of what will happen to us ultimately, but instead invites us to follow and put our trust and our lives in his hands. This morning once more let’s trust the Living God we know in Jesus and trust and encourage one another.

For years, early most every Sunday morning before church, Wendell Berry walks around his farm and up in the woods and sits on his porch looking down the hill at the Kentucky river and will write a poem. He calls them “Sabbath Poems.”

He wrote, “Some Sunday afternoon, it may be, you are sitting under your porch roof, looking down through the trees to the river, watching the rain. The circles made by the raindrops’ striking expand, intersect, dissolve, and suddenly (for you are getting on now, and much of your life is memory) the hands of the dead, who have been here with you, rest upon you tenderly as the rain rests shining upon the leaves. And you think then (for thought will come) of the strangeness of the thought of Heaven, for now you have imagined yourself there, remembering with longing this happiness, this rain. Sometimes here we are there, and there is no death.” (*A Timbered Choir*, p. 201).

“And there is no death.”

“Do not let your hearts be troubled,” Jesus said. “Believe in God. Believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many dwelling places.”

And the old man wrote, “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

“If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.