



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“In Life and in Death”

John 12:20-26

March 18, 2018

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Charles Dickens, the great novelist of the Victorian era, knew how to start a story. *A Christmas Carol* offers one of his most memorable beginnings:

Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that... Old Marley was as dead as a doornail... This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story...¹

In a few sentences, Dickens creates a character who is thoroughly, completely, dead. This is critical for Scrooge’s eventual transformation. Marley will appear in Scrooge’s dreams, from the other side of death, and shock Scrooge toward change and growth.

How do any of us change and grow? How do we become our most whole selves, connected to God and to other people? In our gospel reading, Jesus suggests one way to help this happen, by facing our own death.

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. (John 12:24)

There is value in being reminded that one day we are going to die. An awareness of death has a way of intensifying our experience of life.

Years ago, when we first moved to Columbus, I worked in ministry near Ohio State at the Indianola Presbyterian Church. One day I was driving to the church as I always did from the east side, west on I-70, then north on I-71. Except at the merger of I-70 and I-71 a semi-truck clipped my car and I spun out of control across three lanes of traffic. In that moment, as I spun out, one thought flooded my mind, “Brad is a single parent.” Then came impact, hard against the guardrail. And there I was, somehow spared, still alive, still in a northbound lane of I-71, but now facing south. And shaking like a leaf.

For days, weeks afterward I was intensely aware of being alive. Every sense seemed more vivid. I was so grateful for life, for sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch. Simply to breathe and walk felt miraculous. Having come so close to death, I was more alive to life.

A skier just misses the tree, a swimmer paddles out of a riptide, a diner at a restaurant chokes and can’t breathe, but an alert guest notices and intervenes. If we have had a near death experience, we don’t forget it. It sticks with us. It informs our living.

¹ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, 1843.

In 2015, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and His Holiness the Dalai Lama spent a week in India, collaborating on *The Book of Joy*. They consider it a gift for the world, a fruit of their friendship. In the book, they talk about their own near death experiences.

Archbishop Tutu had polio as a child. He was so sick his father left his bedside and went to buy wood to build his coffin. As a teenager, he survived tuberculosis. Serious illness so early in life taught him to savor moments, to live fully. He says:

Death is a fact of life. You are going to die... It's actually a wonderful thing to do what they call a living will, where you are giving instructions for when the time comes. It's not being morbid. You're saying this is a fact of life... Yes, of course, there is a kind of nostalgia for the things that you have had that you will miss. I will miss my family. I will miss the person who has been my partner for these sixty years. There are many things that I will miss. But in this Christian tradition to which I belong, I will be entering into a fuller life.²

Jesus says:

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. (John 12:24)

A grain of wheat falls into the soil. It dies, and bursts open into a life-bearing producer of food for others. Sometime soon, sometime very soon, spring will come to the cold, frozen tundra of central Ohio—it will come! And we will see this process all around us in nature—starting with beautiful yellow forsythia. John's gospel gives us a preview: Jesus' death will somehow lead to life transformed to nourish the world.

But we get ahead of the story. First, Jesus is going to die. There can be no new life without death. Jesus is going to be as dead as Marley, as dead as a doornail. As Dickens puts it, "This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story..."

John's gospel is clear. If we want to see Jesus, we must face the reality and finality of death.

Yesterday a number of us gathered at the Knox Presbyterian Church in Cincinnati for a memorial service for former Broad Street Head of Staff Tom York. In a packed sanctuary, we gave thanks to God for Tom's life and ministry. Stories and sermon were inspiring, funny, heart wrenching, poignant, and full of hope. We were reminded that life can change in a moment, that we, all of us, are human and so beautifully frail.

Facing death is some of the hardest work we ever do. It can trouble and shake us to the core. It can also intensify our experience of life.

Fifty-nine years ago the Dalai Lama faced his fear of death in Tibet, on the most frightening night of his life, on March 17, 1959. The conflict between the Tibetans and the Communist Chinese occupiers had escalated and he knew it could result in a massacre. He says,

My life really was in danger. I still remember the alertness of mind I felt as I stepped out of the Norbulingka Palace in disguise, dressed in a Tibetan layman's clothes. All my efforts to calm down the situation... had failed. A huge crowd of Tibetans had gathered outside the ... Palace, wanting to block any attempts on the part of the Chinese military to take me away. I had tried my best, but both sides, the

² His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, with Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy* (New York City, Penguin Random House, 2016) p. 161-162.

Chinese and the Tibetans, were deeply entrenched in their positions. Of course, the Tibetan side was deeply devout and was trying to protect me.³

He walked along a road that followed a river. On the other side were Chinese military barracks. He was close enough to see the guards, but no one recognized him. They discovered his escape two days later, after he was on his way across the Himalayas toward India, where he still lives, under political asylum.

The Dalai Lama's alertness of mind rings true to those of us who have had a brush with death. During the experience itself, our adrenaline flows at what feels like 100%. We are exceptionally alert. I remember feeling that way. I noticed every detail. Time passed in slow motion. It was afterward that I felt fragile and vulnerable and ached all over.

When death comes, we acknowledge it in our life together. We treasure and remember our dead. We draw them close even as we must let them go. We call them the communion of saints because we are still in relationship with them. We treasure them and they treasure us. In absentia, they still shape us, stir us, and comfort us. The communion of saints is invisible to our eyes, but visible to our hearts. Yesterday we remembered how Pastor Tom York left his heart print on our lives and on the churches he served. He now has joined the communion of saints.

Yesterday at Knox, Associate Pastor Jana Reister spoke words of hope. She said something like:

Every step along life's journey God says, I am with you and I love you. I was with you yesterday and am with you right now. I will be with you tomorrow and the next day. Let me help you. Let me help you live fully.⁴

As the season of Lent started last month, Christians around the world received ashes on our foreheads in the shape of the cross, and heard these words: "From dust you have come and to dust you shall return." In Lent we face the truth that we are going to die, that those we love are going to die. We also hold on to another, deeper truth. We belong to God. In our living and in our dying, we belong to God. Knowing that, trusting that, being held by that, live fully. Live fully now. Amen.

³ Ibid., p. 166-167.

⁴ Rev. Jana Reister, Knox Presbyterian Church, March 17, 2018.