

And When I Die / Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep

Revelation 21:1-4; 22:1-5; Matthew 3:1-2, 13; 4:1, 12, 17, 23 ; Psalm 146

Saint Marks United Methodist Church, Charleston, WV

10th Sunday after Pentecost (August 17) 2014

Revelation 21:1-4; 22:1-5

21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. **2** And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. **3** And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. **4** He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

22:1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb **2** through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. **3** No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. **4** They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. **5** And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

Matthew 3:1-2, 13; 4:1, 12, 17, 23

3:1 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, **2** "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." ... **13** Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ... **4:1** Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ... **12** Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. ... **17** From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." ... **23** And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.

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We continue today in our summer topical sermon series on. Today is "**How Do You Deal With Death?**" -- a timely topic, indeed, in the life of this congregation. We remember those whose lives have departed from our physical presence, since our last All Saints Sunday:

- **Jack Blair**
- **Eva Jones**
- **Marti-lou Glover**
- **Jean Hill**
- **LaDonna Yaussy**
- **Pat Kelly**

- **Mary Basham**
- **Ruth Burns**
- **Virginia Marr**
- **Danni Jo Hedrick**
- **Virginia Flournoy**
- **Tom Smith**
- **Flora Ann Robertson**
- **Ted Vidal**

We have had many good friends and family members depart from us in the past 9 months.

DEATH – it's a topic about which many people are obsessed, and about which many people practice a great deal of avoidance of thought and discussion. And some (maybe many) people, in a strange way, do both.

The songs are all around us. When I was a youth *and wore a younger man's clothes* [thank you, Bill Joel], David Clayton Thomas sang with Blood Sweat and Tears the song, "And When I Die" which included these words:

**Now troubles are many, they're as deep as a well.
I can swear there ain't no heaven but I pray there ain't no hell.
Swear there ain't no heaven and I pray there ain't no hell,
But I'll never know by living, only my dying will tell.**

And in the first two point charge I served in ministry, a favorite song that the lay worship leader picked for the congregation to sing at least twice a month went like this:

**Onward to the prize before us!
Soon His beauty we'll behold;
Soon the pearly gates will open;
We shall tread the streets of gold.
When we all get to heaven,
What a day of rejoicing that will be!**

**When we all see Jesus,
We'll sing and shout the victory!**

Based on what I've heard some Christians talk about, *What happens to us when we die* is the most important thing in all the world. Every bit of our life needs to be focused on that, to make sure that we don't end up on the wrong side of the track, and regret it for all eternity.

Just two weeks ago I heard someone say, "You know, we used to hear sermons all the time about the "pearly gates." I haven't heard a sermon on that for a long time. And how about those "streets of gold"?"

Death and Dying – two different things, actually. Some people are more afraid of one than the other.

"What do you have to tell us, preacher?" The book stores and movie theaters are full of film and books about people who claim to have seen through the doorway we call death, and are coming back to make a lot of money reporting on what they say they've experienced.

"What are we to believe, preacher?"

**Swear there ain't no heaven and I pray there ain't no hell,
But I'll never know by living, only my dying will tell.**

**When we all get to heaven,
What a day of rejoicing that will be!**

As your pastor, I can only report what I know. And *what I know, I know from personal experience* and from *scripture*.

I know from the LAST WORD – as contained in the last book of the Bible, words we heard read today from the last two chapters of that last book – that something good exists called HEAVEN. And in this good place, *it's much like what is described in the beginning of the first book of the Bible*. It's something *like a garden*; it's a *good place*; it's a place *where God makes His home among us*; and it's *more than we can begin to imagine*.

I also know from scripture that *Jesus' whole life, ministry, death, and resurrection were about HEAVEN* – more than about any other thing. But I also know from scripture that when He came preaching, His words were not limited to a place where we go on the other side of the doorway called death. He said: **the Kingdom of Heaven IS AT HAND**. Not just OVER THERE, but RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, tried to explain it like this:

When a baby is in the womb, all that baby knows is the warmth and security of his immediate surroundings. That baby is unaware of the great, glorious, and immensely larger world that exists just on the other side of the womb – out there where Mother and Father await his arrival. And so, in ignorance, the baby does not want to leave the womb to enter into that which is far better. Once the baby is born into that other world on the other side, then the inferior quality of the baby's former world is apparent.

Wesley used this analogy of *life in the womb versus life outside the womb -- in which the doorway from one to the other is called birth* -- as a comparison to *life lived in the world as we know it versus the life that is lived on the other side of the threshold we call death*.

But, let me share with you what I know **from my personal experience**:

When I was young, about the time I was listening to songs like “And When I Die” by Blood, Sweat and Tears – when I was planning on becoming a minister when I grew up -- I didn't really believe *in* life after death. I didn't believe **against** it; I just didn't have **any** abiding conviction.

And then I went through a several nights long experience of sitting beside my grandfather in a hospital room in the week before he died. He did not speak; he simply lingered. It was in that time of silence, and reflection, and remembering, that I was convinced of a definite **TRUTH: There was simply no way that his GOODNESS would simply disappear when he took his last breath**. His

GOODNESS was a reality that simply would not disappear. It contained too much energy, too much substance, too much life. There simply had to be more than what is contained in the world of five senses. Something there would continue.

That was when I first had an abiding conviction of something living on past the thing called death.

It wasn't a new thought; just a new realization for me. The Psalmist (who wrote our Call to Worship) realized the same thing:

“Put not your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is not help. Their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.” (Psalm 146:3-4)

There's more to LIFE than the mere works of our bodies, including the physicality of our brains. The ideas of our head stop when the neurons quit firing. Faith is more than just ideas and thinking. The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand ... and it goes on and on, just like the goodness of my grandfather ... and it's something that is more than just the world of five senses.

One more experience I will share – and it's come more recently than that of a teenage experience of sitting with a dying grandfather. It's come after I have repeated that same sort of experience more times than I have counted.

This experience came in prayer.

It IS possible, indeed, to do what Jesus preached and taught and lived – TO EXPERIENCE THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN AT HAND.

In a gift I received during prayer, I was able to experience something that others throughout the life and history of the church have called a **“union with Christ”** which is not so much capable of describing as it is of experiencing.

Of this I can say for sure: **there is a way to experience union with Jesus that is so good that if you were to die before opening your eyes, it would not**

be regretted, because it would be a continuation of that state of being. And nothing could be better.

The only metaphor that came to me – and which I held onto after the prayer time ended – was the **notion of a ZIPPER**. **The teeth on one side of the zipper represent the Kingdom of FIVE SENSES: the world in which I am most familiar; I've been aware of it now for a little over 60 years.** **The teeth on the other side of the zipper represent the Kingdom of HEAVEN.**

And **when those two are drawn together in one, then this is the way that Jesus lived His life – the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.**

And **it is the way that we are meant to live our lives** – full of peace, full of power, full of more than we can ask or even imagine, doing (as Jesus said) even greater things than He did during his life and ministry!!

It is more powerful than anything I have ever experienced, and it is the exemplification, for me, of the prayer that our Church has taught through the years: ***help us to live as those who are prepared to die.***

But, in the meanwhile, we continue living on this side of the doorway called death, accomplishing all that God wills for us to do with our lives.

And then, at a time which God decides, we arrive at the point where we **can simply not get any closer to God inside this body**, and **God allows us the freedom to shed the body in order to get even closer – much like the baby sheds the womb.**

This is what I know of death – through scripture and through personal experience. And it all boils down to this: **Jesus loves me; this I know.** So I am able to pray with calm assurance: **Now I lay me down to sleep ...**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.