

“[No Longer] With Us”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Isaiah 25:6-9
November 4, 2018
All Saints’ Sunday

So much about death is contradictory. We weep. We celebrate a life. Sometimes we are relieved that suffering is over, though it means a new suffering for those left behind. In our tradition, we call a funeral service a “Witness to the Resurrection” — a witness we offer not because of what we have seen, but because of the hope we hold in our weary bones. We are asked to rejoice in life everlasting just as our own lives have been frozen in confusion and pain and we teeter on the edge of being overwhelmed.

Here’s another paradox:

Long before I stepped into this pulpit, Pastor Emeritus Sid Burgess began a tradition of including in the All Saints’ sermon remembrances of the members of this congregation who had died since the previous first Sunday in November. My first All Saints’ Sunday, I decided to carry on this sacred custom, remembering Melba Burgess and Helen Burney and Inez Jesse. The next year, it was Mike Laughlin and Jane Grimsley. Then, in 2016, we remembered Clarice Goodwin, Lois North, and Kenny Smith. Last November, we lit candles for Dot Murrah, Dian Bailey, Barbara Murphy, Marilyn Merkle, Lil Warren, and Millie Albright.

I can’t help but think Millie decided to give us one last gift, as we have not had a member of Edgewood Presbyterian Church die in the past year. This is cause for joy.

Ah, but tears have not been wiped away. Congregational membership is important, but the Church universal knows no such bounds, and it has been a year of loss for so many among us. Our membership rolls have not been pierced, but our members’ hearts have. Here are some of the names we have lifted up in prayer this year:

Nell Atkins Tate, Helen Marie Cagle, Bill Rabb, Natalie Story, James Martin, Zach, Frank, Bella Stoddard, Julian Culvern, Indiana Brooks, Debby Godfrey, Semaj Johnson, Mary Wood, Troy Wagner, Glenn Tolbert, Allen Fulton, Jim Ramsdell, June Davis, Evan Garrison, Matthew Childers.

Who else have we lost this year? [*pause for names and bell tolls*]

Since last All Saints’ we have prayed for victims of gun violence in Sutherland Springs; Parkland; Trenton; Santa Fe, Texas; Woodlawn; Kentucky; and at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh.

I sat in the pews at First Presbyterian Church downtown last weekend and listened as the Rev. Catherine Oliver celebrated a life and asked the whole congregation to say the name of the deceased out loud. The phrase “he is no longer with us” stuck out to me in that particular Service of Witness to the Resurrection.

With the same clouded minds, the same rent hearts, the same trembling lips we talk about our loved ones in heaven as if they are gone from us and then as if they are right here among us. This is not confusion or double-talk, but rather a key theological truth. We talk about God as being both immanent — existing within our world and pervading our being — and transcendent — beyond our understanding and experience and being. And I think understanding those who have died as being both far away and nestled in our hearts is crucial.

They are no longer with us. We feel that with every cell of our bodies. It hurts, often physically, especially at first, and then around special anniversaries or holidays or when the dang church makes you think about them. You notice an empty chair. You look at pictures and wish you'd taken more. Your schedule is suddenly different — you haven't just lost their presence, you've lost the time you would spend near them.

They are forever with us. All it takes is someone who knew them mentioning their name, and you can feel their hand in yours. You talk to them, sometimes. You carry them with you when you are afraid and when you are thrilled and when you are unsure of what to do. You see them in the eyes of a child who may or may not share DNA with them. You find a note or a book or a sock or a piece of jewelry and they are with you. They are present. They are here among us — the great cloud of witnesses — and their presence must be named. Let us acknowledge the beloved among us. [*pause for names and bell tolls*]

We hear there is a feast — well-aged wines and rich food — and that death will be swallowed up forever. It is victory and salvation and hope. It seems so far off and impossible. We who live live in this tension, this ambiguity. They who have gone before us rest in a way we cannot perceive fully. They have no need for consolation, but we do. We turn to one another. We turn to our God. We turn to the rock of our salvation — the bread of heaven, the fount of living water. We ask for help. We ask for courage. And we pray.

The 23rd Psalm is printed in your bulletin, and we're going to read it aloud together, and then I'm going to pray. This is, of course, the psalm that gives us both comfort and hope. It gives us the valley of the shadow of death and the overflowing cup. It is a baptism psalm and a funeral psalm and a psalm for every single day in between. Let us pray it together now:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

You only are immortal, the creator and maker of all.
We are mortal, formed of the earth, and to earth shall we return. This you ordained when you created us, saying, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return."
All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song:
Alleluia, **** alleluia ****, alleluia ****
Give rest, O Christ, to your saints, where there is neither pain nor sorrow nor sighing, but life everlasting.
Amen. ***