

Rick Snyder  
First Presbyterian Church  
November 2, 2008

Hope in the Face of Death  
Ecclesiastes 3:11, I Corinthians 15:54-57

It is said that "life begins when the kids move out and the dog dies." If so, Mary Ann and I are getting close to "real life." Children-wise, we've been empty-nesters since Mark left for college in 2002, but we still have Angie, our beloved schnauzer. Angie's 13-1/2, ninety-four in human years. She's nearly blind from diabetes and I give her twice-daily insulin shots. In fact, Mary Ann's nightly refrain as I come up to bed is, "Did you shoot the dog?" Angie takes heart medication and a diuretic, and she no longer faithfully follows us from room to room as she once did. She can no longer jump up on the couch to plop her head on my lap. But Angie's free from pain and navigates well in the house, so we're grateful for a little more time.

It isn't easy to watch loved ones growing older. The book of Ecclesiastes offers a poignant portrait of the difficulties of advancing age,

Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw nigh, when you will say, "I have no pleasure in them; before the sun and moon are darkened – before our sight dims; and the keepers of the house, our hands, tremble and the grinders, our teeth, cease because they are few; when we have insomnia, rising up at the sound of a bird and fear what is high, when the almond tree blossoms -- our hair turns white; and the grasshopper drags itself along – our energy fades; and desire, sexual interest, fades, and man goes to his eternal home.

Ecclesiastes, composed after Israel endures exile, loss of independence, and national disgrace is a realistic, if cynical, view of life. Its author tells of tackling great projects, of building houses and planting vineyards and hoarding possessions. He tells of cheering his body with wine and denying himself no pleasure. But none of these satiate his deep longings, so in the end he concludes that the meaning of life is this: Fear God and keep his commandments.

Aging is difficult because it foretells death. I talked recently to our vet, asking him about when we might have to put Angie down. He said simply, "You'll know." So we sometimes speak of death as a friend. We want life, not merely existence, for our loved ones. The joy in life comes from loving and being loved, from watching a sunset or listening to beautiful music or savoring a crisp apple or meeting a goal or curling up with a good book. When we can no longer partake of these blessings, life loses its meaning, and death can be a relief, awareness that it is indeed "time."

But Scripture does not speak of death as a friend; it calls death an enemy, the last enemy to be destroyed. When Jesus learns that his friend Lazarus has died, His immediate, very human reaction, is to weep. During the Olympic marathon trials in March, one of the favorites, Ryan Shay, collapsed at the five mile mark. His wife, Alicia, herself a world-class runner received word, while she was waiting in Central Park to watch him pass. Alicia literally ran to the hospital. The E.R. personnel couldn't restart Ryan's heart and Ryan died at age 28. In an interview, Alicia described sitting by his bedside for nearly an hour, not wanting to leave, because when she did, she knew a door would close and her life would never be the same again. Death is an enemy, an enemy that robs us of what we cherish most, time with our loved ones.

But death's sober reality makes the Apostle Paul's words to the Corinthians all the more important. Paul is writing to a church that struggles to believe in resurrection. Is there indeed a life to come, beyond our earthly life? Many early Christians expected Christ's return to be imminent, so they did not expect to live long lives. Nor did they expect that members of their fellowship would die before Christ's return. But now as the years are passing, fellow Christians are dying. So what happens to us after death?

In his first letter to Corinth, Paul reminds the Corinthians of Christ's resurrection on Easter morning and that the risen Christ was seen by the women at the tomb, by Peter, by the twelve apostles, by James, and by more than 500 brethren at one time. Paul himself met the risen Christ on the Damascus Road, so Paul asks the Corinthians, "Now if Christ rose from the dead, why do you say there is no resurrection?"

Then Paul contrasts our earthly bodies with our heavenly bodies. Now our bodies decay; then our bodies will endure. Now our bodies know weakness; then our bodies will be filled with power. Now our bodies are sinful; then our bodies will be free from sin. Now our bodies are flesh; then our bodies will be spiritual. Paul continues to reassure the Corinthians until he ends with a ringing assurance, "Death is swallowed up in victory. Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?"

But now, new questions about the life to come arise in Corinth and Paul once again offers reassurance. Paul begins by recounting how God's power has seen him through adversity. He's faced stoning, persecution, rejection, threat, exhaustion and imprisonment. In his words, "We are hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed." God has seen me through all these trials, so trust that God will see you through the last and greatest trial – death itself. "SO DO NOT LOSE HEART! Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that lasts forever."

This was the faith of John Adams, when his beloved Abigail died. John and Abigail were more often separated than together due to John's duties in Washington, and his urgent, lengthy overseas missions. So when Abigail drew her last breath, Adams, whose own

health was tenuous, said, "I prefer this to another separation, for I will be with her again very soon!"

A few months ago Fred Bryant of our congregation died at the age of 100. At both his 90<sup>th</sup> and 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, he asked that this poem be read,

Time was I used to worry and I'd sit around an' sigh,  
And think with every ache I got that I was gonna die.  
I'd see disaster coming from a dozen different ways,  
A prophesy calamity an' dark and dreary days.  
But I've come to this conclusion, that it's foolishness to fret;  
I've had my share of sickness, but I ain't dead yet!

And as the family prepared for Fred's funeral, we all realized – the poem is still true. Fred *ain't* dead yet, nor will he ever die, for he has passed from life to life eternal.

So how are we to live? We, first, do not lose heart. Since God has defeated death, we trust that He can help us face each daily struggle. Sometimes we are hard-pressed on every side, but with Christ living within us, we are not crushed. Often we are perplexed, but with Christ by our side, we do not give into despair. We may face rejection, but Christ will not abandon us. And even if the worst happens, we will not be destroyed because in life and in death, we belong to Christ.

How are we to live? We, second, walk by faith not by sight! Though we do not know what the future holds, we do know that God holds the future. There's another stanza to the poem that we read at Fred's funeral:

I've feared a thousand failures an' a thousand deaths I've died,  
I've had this world in ruins by the gloom I've prophesied.  
But the sun shines out this morning an' the skies above are blue.  
An' with all my griefs an' trouble, I have somehow lived 'em through.  
There may be cares before me, much like those that I have met;  
Death will come some day to take me, but I ain't dead yet!

So often we do prophesy calamity, darkness, gloom and doom. But through it all, like the poem about "Footprints" reminds us, we are helped, sometimes even carried.

How are we to live? We live in light of eternity! The author of Ecclesiastes also reminds us that "God has placed eternity in our hearts." So we instinctively yearn for a life beyond this life, for reunion with our loved ones, for dining together in the Kingdom of God, giving thanks that our Lord Himself will be the host.

But God places eternity in our hearts for another reason – to remind us that we do not have all the time in the world; opportunities come that will not come again; often we do

need to "carpe diem," to seize the day. So we set goals; we give thanks for the gift of each and every day; to leave no unfinished business.

In the movie, *The Bucket List*, Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman play two cancer patients. Freeman is rich in relationships and character, but poor financially. Nicholson is rich in possessions, but poor in relationships and character. As they room together during chemo and during their remissions, they make a "bucket list" – of things they want to do before they . . . kick the bucket. So they race cars, jump out of airplanes, and travel to see the wonders of the world. The final item on Nicholson's list is this – to kiss the most beautiful girl in the world!

One of the deep regrets in Nicholson's life is that he's estranged from his daughter. So Freeman pushes for reconciliation. Nicholson keeps losing his nerve, but finally, after Freeman dies, he goes to his daughter's house. With fear and trepidation, he pushes the doorbell and prays for the best. His daughter answers . . . and the wall begins to be torn down. Then his daughter introduces Nicholson to his granddaughter, and Nicholson bends down to give her a kiss. And suddenly he realizes, he has completed his list – he has kissed the most beautiful girl in the world.

How are we to live? We do not lose heart! We walk by faith! We live in light of eternity, doing in this life whatever God calls us to do to bring reconciliation, light and hope to the situations we face.