

I vividly remember the first time I was in the presence of someone who was actively dying. I was working at a megachurch in Westerville, and an urgent email came to me from a church member that I didn't know. She was on vacation in Florida, and her mother-in-law was dying at a nursing home. She and her husband could not get back in time and wanted someone to go be with her before she died. That someone was me. Though I had prepared for this moment, I was nervous. Before I entered the room, I could hear a woman moaning and crying. I asked the nurse what was wrong, and she told me through her tears that hospice had not come. She said sometimes we treat our animals better than we do people.

I steeled my nerves, and said to myself, you were born for this. I walked right up to this woman's bed, held her hand, and through her moaning and wailing, I put my mouth right next to her ear, and told her who I was. My name is Joel, and I'm your son's pastor. He sent me here to be with you. He wishes he could be here with you, but cannot, and he wanted you to know, that it's OK to die. You don't have to be afraid. Your son and his family love you very much, and they know it's your time. You were created in God's image, and you belong to Christ. You've been baptized into the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and God's love for you will never die. I know it hurts and that you're scared, but nothing can separate you from God's love, not pain, not death. Nothing. You are safe in God's hands.

To minister to those who are dying is one of the greatest blessings of my vocation. On this All Saints Day, we remember those who have died, giving voice to their names as a way to recognize their continuing presence with us, and entrusting them to the God of love. What does our faith say about dying? How does it help us to live and die well?

Recently I was with a retired pastor friend. He's caring for his beloved wife who has Alzheimer's, and it's not easy. This aging thing often isn't. No one hopes to get dementia, and their caregivers bear a heavy burden. I think Alzheimer's scares us so much because in it we are confronted with a thousand small deaths one day at a time. Instead of death happening all at once, it's parceled out slowly. In witnessing the loss of the person we once knew, a little bit at a time, we can't help but be reminded of our own mortality and our fears of forgetting and being forgotten. Who will remember us? The word "remember" literally means to bring back together, where members are reunited. When we remember the dead, we are reunited with them, but all of you who've lost loved ones know, it's not the same. To remember a loved one who's died does not replace their physical presence, does it?

So, what is our hope in life and death? We just heard John's final vision in Revelation, where he saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. The vision of a new heaven and new earth is not original to Revelation. Isaiah 65 says that one day God will create the cosmos anew, but in John's vision, the sea is no more. What does that mean? To the Hebrews, the sea was a symbol of chaos and death, and so John is imagining a day when chaos will be no more, a day when things will be made right. We pray for this day to come, every time we pray, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." The vision of hope throughout scriptures is that heaven and earth will be one. John describes it as a marriage between God and the earth.

John describes the New Jerusalem, which is a symbol of a new earth, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. We are that bride, not just humanity, but the whole earth, and all creation. The idea is that God loves everything God has made, and is so committed to creation, that the commitment can only be described as a covenant.

I love that those of you who started this congregation chose the name covenant. It's a word we rarely use in our time. We talk about contracts—legal agreements of quid pro quo's—you agree to this, and I'll agree to do that. Contracts are made and broken, sometimes with little consequences, other times with punitive repercussions. But God doesn't deal in contracts. The God of scripture, the God of Jesus, is a God of covenant. God is so committed to us, that no matter the ways we break covenant with God, God never breaks covenant with us. And there's a phrase that gets repeated over and over again in the scriptures, that it's been called "The Covenant Formula." It's at the heart of this passage in Revelation, "I heard a loud voice from the throne say, 'Look! God's dwelling is here with humankind. God will dwell with them, and they will be God's peoples. God himself will be with them as their God.'" The formula that God repeats over and over, they will be my people, and I will be their God. God has always been committed to this, from the very beginning, and no amount of sin or suffering, no amount of Alzheimer's and certainly not death can break this covenant that God has made with us. What Christ reveals is the depth of that commitment on God's behalf, that God dwells with us in Christ, and even when we try to separate ourselves from God, to live without God, or even kill God, God still chooses to be with us. That's what covenant means.

The hope of the Christian faith is that just as in the beginning, God, so too in the end, God. God is our hope. God is the one from whom we and all creation are born. God is the one in whom we both live and die, and because it is God in whom we both live and die, we have nothing to fear in death. Christ has revealed to us with absolute clarity that God is love, that we are God's beloved. That's why we can be brave in the face of death, for God's love makes us strong, and promises to be with us in our death and on the other side.

What will that other side look like? We are given symbols and images. John says God will wipe away our tears and make all things new, but the truth is I don't know, and I don't need to know. What I can be sure of is that I am loved, and you are loved, and everything that God has made is loved, and that the covenant formula holds fast—we will be God's people, and God will be our God. Of that, we can be sure. Henri Nouwen wrote an incredible little book on dying well called *Our Greatest Gift*, in which he writes, "The resurrection is God's way of revealing to us that nothing that belongs to God will ever go to waste. What belongs to God will never get lost—not even our mortal bodies. The resurrection doesn't answer any of our questions about life after death, such as, How will it be? How will it look? But it does reveal to us that, indeed, love is stronger than death. After that revelation, we must remain silent, leave the whys, wheres, hows, and whens behind, and simply trust."

That's what faith always comes down to—simple trust. We trust that we will be remembered by God. No matter what life beyond death looks like, of this I can be certain—I will

be remembered by God, and that's enough. The hymn we are about to sing is about the pain of aging and memory loss and assures us that God's memory never fails. The first question of the Heidelberg Catechism in our *Book of Confessions* asks this: "What is your only comfort in life and death?" The answer: "That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ." That's our hope, and it's enough.

As I whispered the promises of God's love into the ear of that woman on her deathbed, her moans lessened. I said the Lord's Prayer. I sang Amazing Grace, and as I did she quieted completely, and her breath slowed. After one more prayer and benediction, I left her in peace and quiet. Five minutes after I left, the nurse called me to tell me she died peacefully. Beloved, hear me now: You don't have to be afraid. You were created in God's image, and you belong to Christ, and God's love for you will never die. Nothing can separate you or those you love from God's love, not pain, not Alzheimer's, not death. Nothing. Why? God's covenant will never fail.