



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Facing the Future Without Fear

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ NOVEMBER 5, 2017

Because God's children are human beings—made of flesh and blood—the Son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could He die, and only by dying could He break the power of the Devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could He set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying.

Hebrews 2:14-15 (NLT)

Thinking about the Landing

There is a time coming for every one of us when our names will be on a list like the Necrology included in this Sunday's bulletin, remembering those from our fellowship who have ended their life's journey in the past twelve months. The medical prognosis for every single one of us is the same: terminal mortality. Your body and mine will not and cannot last forever.

And this is actually a gracious gift from the Lord. When we really understand the biblical promise of eternal life, we grasp that we wouldn't want to remain inside this limited, fallible, imperfect and vulnerable shell—because to do so would make it impossible to experience heaven and the resurrected body He has promised us.

We give so much time and effort and worry and mental and physical energy to the tasks and duties of this life, and to acquiring and maintaining the physical and material things of this world. In comparison, most people spend little, if any, time thinking about and preparing for what is to come. A recent commercial for an insurance company shows a man of a couple centuries ago designing and building wings to fit on his back. He dreams of flying—as has mankind for millennia.

As the scene opens, the man has strapped his contraption onto his back and has climbed the railing of a high bridge overlooking a river. People from the town are gathered to watch. The daring man takes a deep breath and launches himself into the air—and he flies, gliding along above the river for several hundred yards. The townspeople cry in wonder, “He can fly!” But one old man shrugs and says, “Yes, but he can’t swim.” And at that moment the birdman splashes into the middle of the river—to face a whole new reality! He spent all his energy preparing for the flight, and neglected to prepare for the landing. The message was sponsored by a company peddling retirement fund planning, and intended to motivate people to plan for their financial future after their working years. But it has an even greater spiritual relevance.

How many people all around us spend their entire energies preparing for their flight through life and none at all preparing for the landing at the moment of their death? If people do think at all about death (usually in awkward moments at funeral homes or memorial services when they can’t evade it), the most common emotion is fear. It’s been that way among us mortals for thousands of years. And that’s why the words we read are so profound and so revolutionary that they have changed the course of history.

Did you catch what the Bible says? We do not need to fear death if we trust in Jesus Christ. His whole purpose in coming to earth was to defeat that ultimate enemy on our behalf and set us free from its terrors.

On this All Saints Weekend we are not only remembering and giving thanks for those of our friends, our family, our Christian brothers and sisters who have gone before us. We also have the opportunity for a few minutes to think together about our own “landing.” And we are doing so in the context of the promises of God’s Word that we need not be afraid.

What Really Matters

This is how Charles Colson—former political leader, notorious Watergate felon, and then founder of Prison Fellowship, who died just a few years ago—reflected upon his later years as he faced the end of life as a believer:

It is a very healthy thing to live knowing that we are going to die ... As I’ve aged, I’ve noticed changes. There’s a price to pay as our bodies slow down. Dying goes on in the midst of life.

These reminders of mortality help us focus, though, on the things that really matter.

A believer can think about such things without fear, because he or she knows that the end is really the beginning. And this wisdom, this 20/20 insight into what life and death and eternity are really all about, is not just reserved for those who are of advanced chronological age. Let me remind you of the story of David Bloom.

David was a young rising star at NBC News 15 years ago. He was destined, many assumed, to one day host the TODAY show or even anchor the Nightly News. He had become very serious about his faith, and met regularly with a Christian businessman in New York named Jim Lane for mutual encouragement and accountability in their Bible study and prayer lives. When the Iraq War was about to start, David volunteered to go to Kuwait and serve as an embedded reporter with the U.S. Army. He and his wife knew that it was a risky decision, but he felt called to be there.

David kept in touch by satellite phone and email with his friend Jim and his wife Melanie. He knew the risks, and in his final phone call to Jim urged him to be sure to remind his wife and daughters of how much he loved them if he didn't make it back. And, as we know, the shocking news came that, several days into the invasion, David Bloom had died suddenly at the age of 39 of a pulmonary embolism while traveling in a tank with the armored division.

A huge crowd of the news media, business executives and his many friends packed St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City for his memorial. The following words, from one of his last email messages to Melanie, were shared by his friend Jim Lane:

You can't begin to fathom the changes I have and am continuing to undergo. God takes you to the depths of your being—until you are at rock bottom—and then, if you turn to Him with utter faith and walk only with Him, He picks you up by your bootstraps and leads you home. I hope and pray that all my guys get out of this in one piece. But I tell you, Mel, I am at peace. I'm saddened by the glimpses of death and destruction I've seen, but I'm at peace with my God and with you. I realize that what matters most to me is my relationship with you and the girls, and with Jesus. God is forging my soul through this fire.

When you live in this earthly life by faith in Christ, as David Bloom did, you don't fear its ending—because you know where you're going.

Contrasting Views

None of us knows what the experience of dying will be like. It may involve some sharp temporary pain, or it may not. Nobody knows. And while we may fear the circumstances of that dying, what lies beyond it is not to be feared. What a profound difference it makes to believe in eternal life. Think of these two famous men from the late 19th century, and how dramatically opposite their final days were. The first man: Samuel Clemens, aka "Mark Twain," the American writer and humorist, who never could quite come to terms with the Christian faith and mocked it repeatedly in "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer," "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" and other novels. At the end of his life, he wrote this:

The burden of pain, care, and misery grows heavier year by year. At length ambition is dead, pride is dead, vanity is dead, longing for their release is in their place. It comes at last—and we vanish from a world where we were of no consequence, achieved nothing, where we were just a mistake and a failure and a foolishness.

Now that is, indeed, an ending to be feared—an ending in nothingness. But now listen to the words of his contemporary, the British writer and pastor Charles Spurgeon, reflecting on the pending moment of his death:

To come to Thee, O Lord, is to come home from exile, to come to land out of the raging storm, to come to rest after long labor, to come to the goal of my desires and the summit of my wishes.

Faith in Jesus makes that much difference in how we face not only death but life! This is not a winding down to nothingness, but a preparation for a resurrected life beyond measure in our eternal home.

Listen carefully. Can you hear them? The people on this list are whispering the same thing to you and me this morning: "How foolish and naive of you people to be afraid of death. You have nothing to worry about. Just take your Heavenly Father's hand and trust Him." ■