

## **With the Lord**

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast*

*Olentangy Church*

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### **Isaiah 26:13-19 NIV**

O LORD, our God, other lords besides you have ruled over us,  
but your name alone do we honor.  
They are now dead, they live no more;  
those departed spirits do not rise.  
You punished them and brought them to ruin;  
you wiped out all memory of them.

You have enlarged the nation, O LORD;  
you have enlarged the nation.  
You have gained glory for yourself;  
you have extended all the borders of the land.

LORD, they came to you in their distress;  
when you disciplined them,  
they could barely whisper a prayer.  
As a woman with child and about to give birth  
writhes and cries out in her pain,  
so were we in your presence, O LORD.  
We were with child, we writhed in pain,  
but we gave birth to wind.  
We have not brought salvation to the earth;  
we have not given birth to people of the world.

But your dead will live;  
their bodies will rise.  
You who dwell in the dust,  
wake up and shout for joy.  
Your dew is like the dew of the morning;  
the earth will give birth to her dead.

### **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**

*One subject after another comes up in Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica: the church's faithfulness, the apostle's ministry among them, mutual love, proper behavior. After these, Paul takes up an item of concern to the Christians in Thessalonica, a concern raised by the passing of time and by the passing away of some of their number — or, to use the euphemism, by their "falling into sleep."*

Brothers and sisters, we want you to know about those who are falling into asleep, so that you won't grieve the way people without hope do. If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, then we also believe that, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen into sleep. By the word of the Lord, we tell you this: that we who remain alive when the Lord comes will not be ahead of those who have fallen into sleep. Because, with a loud command, with an archangel's voice, and with a divine fanfare, the Lord himself will come down from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first, then we who remain alive will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord. Now encourage one another with these words.

## Sermon

Death is the issue that will not go away. We try to avoid it. Have you heard much about death in the current health care debate? I haven't. Health care is about avoiding death at all costs. Maybe not "at all costs," but at enough cost to hugely influence the overall economy. Still nobody seems to be quoting Lucretius in this debate. In the first century B.C., he wrote: "By protracting life we do not deduct one jot from the duration of death." I suppose that's why we'll spend ourselves into the poorhouse to keep death at bay. Because, as Molière said, "We die only once, and for such a long time."

But we cannot keep death at bay. No matter how hard we try — how much money we spend, how carefully we eat, how consistently we exercise, how faithfully we take our pills — no matter all that, death will find a way. And so for us, for all humanity, from the beginning to today to the end, death is the issue that will not go away.

**To begin with, death hurts.** I don't mean dying. Dying, of course, can hurt in all kinds of ways: physical agony, emotional torment, spiritual confusion and despair. But I don't mean dying, I mean death. Death the irresistible force. Death the inescapable presence. Death the unwelcome, inevitable guest.

Death hurts, "and for such a long time." Barb just lost her dad. That hurts. We all lost Grace a few weeks ago. That hurts. When I met Jan, she had lost her mom two and a half years earlier. It still hurt then. It still hurts today, thirty-four years later. And losing her dad last year . . . that only adds to the hurt. My mom died fifteen years ago and my dad twelve years ago. It still hurts. It always hurts. There's no getting away from it.

Kathleen Sheeder Bonanno's daughter was murdered some years ago. The hurt has softened with the passage of time, but death remains a painful presence for Bonanno, a presence that won't go away. Bonanno, a poet, wrote about death, the awful intruder, this way:

Death Barged In  
in his Russian greatcoat  
slamming open the door  
with an unpardonable bang,  
and he has been here ever since.

He changes everything,  
rearranges the furniture,  
his hand hovers  
by the phone;  
he will answer now, he says;  
he will be the answer.

Tonight he sits down to dinner  
at the head of the table  
as we eat, mute;  
later, he climbs into bed  
between us.

Even as I sit here,  
he stands behind me  
clamping two  
colossal hands on my shoulders  
and bends down  
and whispers to my neck,  
From now on,  
you write about me.

Death hurts. It tears at the fabric of life. It leaves in shreds what once was whole. Somehow we mend the pieces as best we can, but the pattern is forever changed. We are forever changed. Death has a way of hollowing out the living, as one person after another is lost to us, as we are cut off from the past — from our past, from our home — and are left only with volatile memory that itself will give way before death's exploratory forays as they sharpen their aim on us.

Death hurts. We have to begin there.

**And death . . . none of us is immune to death.** I am amused by the health care conversation in our country. I have to laugh. If I didn't, I would probably cry. What amuses me is the way we speak. Doctors, medicines, amazing new medical technologies, they all work together to "save lives." And they do, sort of. But doctors and medicines and medical devices don't "save lives," they save lives for now. Now that's often a good thing, a very good thing. Have a look at Topher, and tell me that's not a good thing! But Topher's life was only saved for now. Roger's life was only saved for now. No one's life is save for good. We all are going to die. And so on Ash Wednesday, whether you're Topher or Roger or anyone else, the word is, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." And so at the graveside the word is, "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust." When we talk about health care, we seem to forget that.

But none of us is immune to death. I am going to die sooner or later. So are you. There is no avoiding death. An early eighteenth century gravestone at the Northbridge Center Cemetery in my hometown has this inscription: "Death is a debt that to each one comes due/I've paid mine, you'll pay yours too."

Maybe it's an occupational hazard, but more than once I've driven past Centennial High School — I've seen the sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen year old girls there on the sidewalk along Kenny Road. They're beautiful. And they're so alive! I've driven past Centennial High School on my way to Crown Pointe to visit Grace or, before that, to visit Eve. There at Crown Point I would see there the eighty-five and ninety-five year old girls, whose next stop is a cemetery. And in those tired old faces, almost completely worn out, I would see those sixteen and seventeen year old girls from Centennial High School, see where they too will end up, if death doesn't take them sooner.

None of us is immune to death.

**That leaves two questions. *What then?* and *What now?*** The "What then?" question is behind this morning's reading from 1 Thessalonians. Members of the church community in Thessalonica had begun to die. What would become of them? That was the question. What would be their fate? The question was an ultimate one, apparently, not an intermediate one. Paul said nothing really about the current situation of those who had died. They had "fallen into sleep," he said. Whether those were Paul's words, the church's words, or a common expression, we don't know. And it doesn't matter, because Paul does not elaborate.

Instead Paul focuses on the ultimate question, to which he offers a succinct answer. Those who have died before Christ's return will rise and join him before anyone alive gets there. But then all of Christ's people will join him, and they all will be with him forever. The point is simple. Those who have died will not miss out on anything. In fact, they will be the first in line. And they will share the destiny of all the children of God: to be with the Lord forever. What exactly that will mean, Paul doesn't say. The Bible says surprisingly little about it. Whatever it is about, however, it will be good, very good.

Then there is the "What now?" question. Sometimes people who have faced death squarely, or people who are dying, are changed by the encounter. Coming to grips with death can heighten a person's awareness of life. It can put thing into new perspective. It can rearrange a person's priorities.

A key strand of biblical truth is an insistence on human mortality. The Bible will not let us forget that we are all going to die, that I am going to die and so are you. Not that this truth isn't universally available outside the Bible. It is. But it is so often avoided or denied that we need the Bible to sit us down, when life hasn't done it forcefully enough already, and tell us again and again that we are going to die. But the Bible doesn't leave us there. Because then it asks us, "Knowing that you're going to die, how then are you going to live?" In other words, "What now?"

Paul doesn't answer that question in today's reading, but really it's the question that most of the Bible is about. The Bible is not so much about "What then?" about living forever with Jesus — though that is a

precious part of biblical testimony — as it is about “What now?” about “How will you live, knowing that you will die? How will you live, knowing that Christ is your only lasting life?”

Those questions take a lifetime to answer, because the only way to answer them is with our lives. Lives that are punctuated by death. Lives that are inhabited by death. Lives that are haunted by death. Lives that offer no escape from death and its hurt, but only the hope that just as Jesus Christ lives forever, having once died, so we too shall live. Until then, with God’s help, we will live. Not in fear of death. Not blind to death. But aware of death and ultimately free from death, because its grip is being broken by the One who broke free for good.