

Invited To...Death (Reprise)

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- [0 : 0 0] So, it's good to see you. Happy Palm Sunday. If you are new, welcome. We're glad that you're here. And I want to just give this quick caveat, and then we'll get into things, is that this is an unusual sermon for me, is that I usually don't preach for my manuscript. It's not my style. And usually, I'll get into this a little bit.
- We're a lot more like in the Bible and all of that sort of stuff, and this is a little different. So, there's my caveats. If you want a different kind of sermon, keep coming, and you'll get one. So, here we go. I'm not entirely sure when my strong discomfort with death began.
- Perhaps it began when I was 14 years old. My family got the call that my grandpa Gates was in the hospital after suffering a massive stroke. I'd only known grandpa for about four years, since I had come into this particular foster home when I was 10.
- But he had already become a role model in my faith for me. He had suffered a stroke and some heart attacks in a couple of decades before this final stroke. He was mostly disabled at this point, pretty slow to get around.
- Loved to watch old John Wayne movies on his ancient cabinet television the size of a small moose. But he was also brimming with joy. Nothing made him happier than offering a literal bowl of cherries to me and my siblings when we came over.
- [1 : 2 8] He made uncomfortably dirty jokes in public restrooms. And without variation, whenever we visited a busy restaurant, he would say, we should build a restaurant here. And he was a prayer-er, what we used to call a prayer warrior.
- He had a big poster board that he would keep all of his prayer requests on. And there were a lot of them because everyone who knew Grandpa Gates knew to ask him to pray for them.
- And if you saw the poster board, you would see the archaeology of years' worth of prayer requests. Some were crossed out because they were answered. Some were crossed out because they were not. Some were circled or highlighted or marked with exclamation points due to their urgency or importance.
- He, of course, was the default prayer giver at family gatherings. And while I'll admit that my young body vibrated with impatience due to the lengthiness of his missives to God, my heart was also stirred.
- He spoke to God like a friend, even a lover at times. He cried during his family prayers more often than not. Personally, I can't think of the last time I cried while praying aloud.
- [2 : 4 2] So we got the call. Family gathered at Grandpa's hospital bedside. And it seemed likely that this would not be a stroke he would recover from.
- As the resident aspiring pastor, yes, even at the age of 14, this was well known. I was invited to read and pray Psalm 23 over his bedside and dying body.
- And so I started to read the words of David. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters.
- He restoreth my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. And yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil.

For you are with me, and your rod and your staff, they come from me. And if you know the psalm, the psalm goes on from there. But at this point, my unconscious grandpa began to choke.

[3 : 41] And then within a few moments, he died. It's hard to beat a scarring moment like that, reading a Bible passage that's meant to bring comfort, but rather ushers in death.

But unfortunately, I can beat that moment. I'm pretty sure my discomfort with death begins even earlier. When I was seven, I was still living with my biological mother, Toni. And her mother, my maternal grandmother, Phyllis, passed away from alcoholism.

Toni refused to believe it. And I don't just mean the typical stages of grief refused to believe it. I mean, Toni suffered from paranoia, schizophrenia, a mental illness that caused her grasp on reality to come and leave and wait.

So on the day that my grandma was intended to be buried, Toni took seven-year-old me to the funeral home before the services, before anyone else was there, to try to wake Phyllis up.

She stuffed some snacks in the casket, some water. She opened up her eyelids and tried to revive her. As you can imagine, this gave me nightmares for years, which one miracle of my life was how those nightmares prayed over and never come back.

[4 : 50] But that's a different story. So together, we can question if this is a real memory or the imagination of a seven-year-old, but I do remember Toni taking me and my older half-sister to the cemetery after the burial to start digging up the casket.

Fortunately, the cemetery gates were locked. You all know that old joke, right? Why did they put locked gates on the cemetery? Because people are dying to get in. See, even now, I don't feel comfortable.

And you may not feel all that comfortable. So let's throw a joke in. He's the tension. I heard a song this week that got my mind thinking about all of my discomfort with death.

It's about Jesus and Palm Sunday and Good Friday, and the song said this. On Palm Sunday, a crowd gathers to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem.

Simon Peter had called Jesus the Messiah. Peter had claimed, if I must die alongside you, I won't deny you. The expectation is that Jesus, this famous prophet and preacher and healer, will at last come in power to establish a kingdom of military might and economic abundance and religious fervor.

[6 : 16] So the crowd gathers, and they sing their cries of, help us, Hosanna. Now this actually had happened before in those same streets in Jerusalem, about 150 years before Jesus came in.

150 years or so before Jesus, Simon Maccabeus entered Jerusalem, because he had just freed Jerusalem from the Greek empire. And the book of Maccabees, which isn't in most Protestant Bibles, but it's in others.

The book of Maccabees puts it like this. The yoke of the nations was removed from Israel, and the people began to write in their documents and contracts. In the first year of Simon Maccabees, the great high priest and commander and leader of the Jews.

And so on the 23rd day of the second month, in the 171st year, they entered it with praise and palm branches and with harps and cymbals and stringed instruments and with hymns and songs, because a great enemy had been crushed and removed from Israel.

And Simon decreed that every year they should celebrate this day with rejoicing. And so of course, the crowd see Jesus coming, and they start cutting down the palm branches again, as they had done every year since Simon had done the same thing.

[7 : 33] Jesus was coming, just like Simon had, with the hope to remove the yoke of Rome. But then Judas' kiss comes smooching down onto Jesus.

The male disciples scatter, and Jesus is tried and hanged on a cross. And a couple thousand years later, it's easy to judge, but I would have scattered too.

And I was a younger pastor, even younger than I am now, believe it or not. I saw a couple in the grocery store, and the woman had just lost her dad. And instead of going to say hello, to give condolences, I avoided them.

I left the store. In my mind, I can still picture them shopping in the pasta aisle. Maybe they weren't grieving in that exact moment. But I also know the anger I feel whenever I lose someone.

The anger that life has the audacity to keep happening at you. That you still have to go to Walmart to buy spaghetti sauce, even though someone has just been ripped from your life. So I imagine if I felt that way, I wouldn't talk to them.

[8 : 43] Now the woman disciples of Jesus, we should remember, did not abandon Jesus. Mary, the blessed woman who gave birth to the Savior of the world, also buried him. Out of her womb came the Son of God, and into what she thought was a grave, she lied down the Son of Mary.

That grave ended up being a womb as well. She just didn't know that yet. It's no surprise that the women were the ones who stayed with Jesus through his crucifixion and burial.

That was the role of women, to bury the dead. The male disciples, being good Jewish boys in most likelihood, hadn't dealt with a dead body in some time. It would make them ritually impure, and women were already second-class citizens and ritually impure a quarter of the month due to their uteruses doing what uteruses do.

Simon Peter wanted to play soldier in the garden where Jesus was betrayed, chopping off someone's ear. But then Jesus dared to heal that same soldier, and it seemed like Jesus really, truly wasn't even going to try to be that Maccabean Messiah after all.

And when the likelihood of death seemed sky-high, Simon, the wannabe soldier, turned his tail and ran. Back when Pastor Tanetta planned this year's sermons, the original title for this week was Invited to Death.

[10 : 06] I spent a long time researching the constellation of theories related to the atonement. I was thinking about how to answer the question, why did Jesus die, and what did it actually do, and how to explain the defeat of the enemies and the powers of death and sin and the devil to a modern crowd like us who's not so sure about invisible forces and spirits?

I was thinking about how do I explain the Bible's invitation to suffering and to death so clear in the New Testament to people who have simultaneously privilege and already suffer marginalization and a higher chance of death.

Yes, you're invited to die. The Bible says so, but not because the Bible, not because society thinks your gender or sexuality or the color of your skin is worth less than someone else's. You're invited to die because in your death someone else might live and your death is temporary after all.

It's not so much that Jesus was our substitute on the cross, rather he was our forerunner, the author and the finisher of our faith who runs the race ahead of us after whom we follow. We too are crucified with Christ.

We too are buried with Christ. We too shall experience resurrection life like Christ. So in other words, a typical highly intellectual Anthony sermon. And if you're new, all of this storytelling and poetic imagery is appealing to you.

[11 : 25] Sorry, my next sermon will probably not be quite so heart on sleeve. But honestly, I think there's something so much more practical and real about a sermon called Invited to Death.

But the reality is we all have had people in our lives die or we soon will. I know my own impulse at death and even at grief is disgust, unease, repulsion.

Get me away from that casket and the urn and the cemetery and the tombstone when I stood at my grandmother, my maternal grandmother's grave who Tony was denying was even dead in the first place.

She yelled at me, stop flying. And so of course, that reverberates to today. But somebody had to bury the son of God, the son of Mary.

And someone has to sit with the dying and someone needs to cry with the grieving. And Jesus did every single one of those things. He wept with the bereaved. He comforted those left behind.

[12 : 29] He held hands with those who were lost. Jesus even emptied himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. A cross, which was the most humiliating, shameful way to die.

The very word cross or crux was considered a curse in polite company, like an ancient death word. The letter tau, which looks like a T to us, was considered unlucky because of its connection to crucifixion.

It absolutely confounded and confused and disgusted the ancient world that the Galileans, the Christ followers, the Christians would dare to worship and venerate and call a criminal on a cross God.

And then I found myself this week not thinking of the constellation of atonement theories I could wow you with, but instead coming back again and again to the words of Paul, Jesus loved me and gave himself for me.

The ancient myths of an invisible deity, inaccessible to human reason and senses, had their spines broken upon the body of Jesus, a God who loved me and gave himself for me and died for me.

[13 : 48] He died for me. Could I not at least comfort the grieving for him? Atonement theories are nice and complicated and fun to think about, but in the end to see the Savior of the world upon the curse word of execution acquainted with grief and well familiar with sorrow and then to be invited to that same kind of life as Jesus, not merely to take up my cross as a form of self-flagellation and discipline, but to take up my cross because it's in my discomfort with death that I can grow close to those who grieve.

It's better than any atonement theory, I think. I have the urn of my brother's ashes sitting on my dresser. I make sure to pick it up and think of David at least once a week, usually more.

Sometimes I'm embarrassed that such a sacred thing in my house sits in such an unsacred place. But I think there's something important about keeping such a sacred thing in a mundane location.

It reminds me that death is an insult to life, a curse upon the world, an indictment on the failures of society and people and, dare I say, despite what we just sang, that feels like even God's failures.

But to have the mundane and the sacred in such close proximity is really how it's always been. Things are sacred because we say they are. Usually what we say is sacred was mundane to begin with.

[15 : 17] The death of Jesus reminds me that God is most revealed in the most unexpected ways. Burning bushes and parted seas. We thought our cries of Hosanna, of help us, would lead to a magnificent show of power.

Instead, it led to a pitiful display of weakness. And if God is most revealed in weakness, what divinity do I miss out on because I won't draw close to grief.

I won't draw close to the grieving and the pain. Years after my grandfather's death, I spoke this, the following, at my grandma's funeral just last year.

We grieve because death is an aberration to what God intends for creation. We grieve because death rips gaping holes into what ought to be.

Death and loss remove those we love, both young and old, and then is brazen enough to ask us to continue on. We grieve because for Jesus' followers, it is the example set up for us by Christ, our example.

[16:27] Christians follow a God who wept at the tomb of a friend, who was often moved with compassion and pity and groaned within himself. A God who knelt in a garden and begged that his own death would not be his fate.

Grief is the right and proper response to death and loss. But grief has also tined your faith. Hope that this is not the end of the story.

Hope that one day tombs will be empty. Sons and daughters and brothers and sisters united with fathers and mothers and siblings. And so, friends, may grief and hope mingle to give us power and fortitude today to not only cry out in prayer Hosanna, but also filled with the spirit of God to be God's answer to that prayer.

Is there someone in our life also crying out Hosanna? And we just might meet God if we come close to that person and pray that prayer with us.

Amen. Amen. And trustest to don't to be here as prayer can't music and hi to the people and if I am with me too to the people I am scratching a room