

Eternity Sunday – “That where I am they also may be with me...”

A Sermon Preached by Zac Klassen

at Bloomingdale Mennonite Church, November 21st, 2021

Scripture: John 17:24; Luke 23:44-46

For the last 7 Sundays we have been exploring the discipline of prayer in the Christian life. We have gone to school to learn to pray with the Psalmist. The Psalmist gave us greater insight into praying in the mode of praise and thanksgiving. In her sermon, Linda looked at Psalm 23 and asked us to consider the many ways that God, our shepherd, meets our need. The Psalmist also taught us to pray in the mode of lament. We learned that God desires that we bring our authentic selves in prayer no matter how raw our emotions may be. Finally, the psalmist taught us to pray in the mode of confession. We were challenged to bring those parts of our lives that are disordered to the God of love and mercy in prayer and then to work on those parts of ourselves that God calls us to change.

We also learned to pray with the Prophets. In a surprising turn of events, we had a guest speaker show up, the prophet Jeremiah, and he told us about his experiences praying and being told by God *not* to pray, for his people. Jeremiah encouraged us, among other things, to pray that God would help us to be attuned to the law of God written on our hearts. Jeremiah also encouraged us to pray for the well-being and wholeness of the people around us: our neighbors, friends, strangers, and even our enemies. Prophetesses Miriam and Mary taught us to pray for social and political transformation—for freedom for the oppressed, for the undoing of oppressive systems and powers that oppress, for peace in a world of unrest, and for the raising up of the lowly in a world of such stark inequalities. Finally, we learned from Jesus last week that prayer need not be elaborate, long-winded, or fancy; that God knows what we need before we ask. Jesus

taught us to pray a simple yet profound prayer that we have been learning through experiencing the story during this prayer series. We have learned to pray to God in whispers and loud songs; to breathe in God and breathe to breathe out God.

This series on prayer has been rich, with many personal stories and insights shared along the way from many of you as well, and with the awesome bulletin covers provided by the children. We could, of course, talk about prayer for more than 8 weeks. There is no end to what we could learn about prayer. Perhaps this is because prayer is at its core communion with the God who has entered so fully into our lives in Jesus that our stories and God's story have become forever intertwined, never to be rent asunder. Today, then, as we draw this series to a close, we do so with a recognition that the life of prayer—of communion with God—extends into eternity. This is a fitting recognition to dwell on today on Eternity Sunday. On eternity Sunday we take time to acknowledge endings and the pain they bring. But we also take time today to dwell on the mystery of communion, of shared life, with God and with each other that extends beyond the reaches of our mortal frame.

Today in our scripture readings from the Gospel of John and then from the Gospel of Luke, we get to listen in on two significant and mysterious moments of prayer in the life of Jesus that teach us something about this “communion beyond mortality.” First, in chapter 17 of the Gospel of John, we get to listen in on what has come to be called Jesus’ “high priestly prayer,” named so because throughout chapter 17 Jesus intercedes on behalf of “his own,” on behalf of those disciples that God has called alongside Jesus in his earthly ministry, but also on behalf of all of those that would later come to be followers of Jesus long after his earthly ministry had ended (that’s us!). In this intimate moment of prayer, Jesus lifted his gaze to God and asked that God would do several things for his disciples: Jesus prayed that God would protect them (v.15),

sanctify them or make them holy (v.17), and that God would make them one with each other and with Jesus together in his oneness with God (vv.21-23). I don't know about you, but I find it so powerful to think that Jesus prayed not only for his disciples 2000 years ago, but also for us today. I can't help but wonder whether we might practice praying these words *with* Jesus too: "God, in Jesus' name, protect us, sanctify us, and make us one as you and Jesus are one."

One of the final requests that Jesus makes to God in his "high priestly prayer" comes in verse 24 which we heard read for us: "Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory" (v.24). What could this prayer mean? Weren't the disciples already where "Jesus was?" And had they not already seen some of Jesus' glory in the wonderful things that he did throughout his ministry (cf. John 11:1-45)? In this moment of intimate prayer, what does Jesus mean when he asks that God grant his disciples to be with him and see his glory?

Earlier in John's gospel, Jesus had said: "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will *draw* all people to myself." (John 12:32) I wonder, can this image of Jesus "lifted up" on the cross and drawing all people to himself help us understand his prayer? When Jesus prays that God would grant that his disciples "be with him where he is," there seems little question that, knowing about his coming death, Jesus was asking God to grant his disciples communion with Jesus that transcends the physical confines of first century Palestine. Knowing that he would face death, Jesus asked for ongoing communion with his disciples.

I think there are at least two ways we can understand this "ongoing communion" and I think both are important. First, we can understand Jesus as saying that he desired that God would draw the disciples to oneness with Jesus and God as they continued to live and minister on earth. Just because Jesus was going to leave did not mean that they would be without his presence—in

fact, he promised to be with them always (Matthew 28). There is yet another way to think about this “ongoing communion” that Jesus was talking about, however. We can also understand Jesus as saying that he desired that God would draw the disciples to be with him when they faced their own death. It is as if Jesus were saying to God, “as I have made my journey beyond this life to you, please grant that they may make the same journey, so that they may join me.” This interpretation is quite common in early Christian reflection on scripture, especially on the Psalms. Take Psalm 24, for example:

Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in.

Early Christian commentators often read this Psalm as referring to Jesus’ ascension to heaven.

By making his way to heaven, Jesus made a way and opened up the ‘gates’ on our behalf so that we have a path to follow. One could say that Jesus attests to this in John 14:2-3:

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

Of course “heaven” is a word that we often use to name the place of our dwelling place with God. Of course, through the ages people’s ideas of heaven have run wild in ways that can sometimes be unhelpful. In popular culture it has become marketable, for example, to talk at length about the real-estate features of heaven and even to try to *prove* that it is “for real.” We have sometimes also used our ideas about heaven to justify irresponsible attitudes towards life here and now on this earth. In a time of climate crisis, we must not appeal to a future life in heaven as a justification to misuse the place that God has called us to care for and tend (Genesis 2:15). As the old adage wisely teaches us, we must avoid getting so caught up in imagining or desiring heaven that “we are no earthly good.” The problem of being “no earthly good” can appear at the worst times too. Anyone who has ever attended a funeral for someone who has

passed away far too early in life knows how talk of heaven at such times, while no doubt important for bringing some comfort, can also feel cheap and crassly sentimental, a way to skirt the real anger and pain that comes from sudden or shocking loss. Sometimes we just aren't ready to hear the words: "they are in such a better place now." Sometimes we need to kick and scream and yell at God and say, "It's not fair!" instead of trying to grit our teeth, bear it, and speak platitudes about how great heaven is.

As we learned through our prayer service on lament, it is so important that we bring our authentic selves to worship. In the context of a funeral or on a day such as today when we take time to acknowledge our losses, this means that we must make space to recognize that death is often experienced as an intrusion and disruption of the goodness of a person, of relationships, and of future potential. There are, of course, certainly times when death can feel natural and, in the context of a life well-lived, even "good." Here I think, for example, of the way Genesis 25:8 describes Abraham's death: Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years." In these cases, we often recognize the fact that we are mortal creatures who cannot live forever in these bodies and so death does not have the same sting it does other times. But what about when the "good old age" was never reached? Or, what about times when someone was full of years, but there was so much left unfinished?

We don't often talk about our mortality in church, but funerals and days like today remind us that we must. In the context of our scripture reading for today, acknowledging death and especially the intrusive and disruptive nature of death, might help us hear Jesus' prayer in a way that refuses to make it cheap or overly sentimental; in a way that does not try to erase or cover over the pain death brings. Hear again Jesus' prayer: "I desire that those...whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory." I don't know where the emphasis falls

for you in this verse, but I focused in on “see my glory.” What is Jesus’ glory, I wondered, as I read this passage? And then I thought: what else could Jesus’ glory be but the entirety of his human life—from his birth in a manger to his death on a cross sometime in his early 30s—what else could his “glory” be other than that short 30 some years of life, eternally enlivened with the light and abundant love of God present from before the foundation of the world (John 17:24b); his human life held and cherished by God, never lost and forgotten but rather taken into God and then shared with “his own,” with those that he draws to himself.

When our time comes and we see Jesus’ glory, I wonder, then, might we just see the truth, goodness, and beauty of his whole life? And not only the happy stuff, but also the hard and the difficult stuff? Might we *even* see, just as Thomas did, the presence of the nail wounds on his transfigured body, and so see our own wounds transfigured too? What if heaven is not a place, as our children’s song for today suggested, where we “forget” our sad songs in the presence of Jesus’s glory, but where God leads us to sing our sad songs in a different key. What if *Christ’s life* is precisely that different key that we sing our own songs in: our stories transfigured by being included in Christ’s story? Maybe we can say, then, that our sad songs will change when they are sung in the “key of Christ,” the fullness of God come to us in the crucified and risen one. If this is what Jesus meant when he asked God that we might be with him and see his glory, then Jesus did not pray that God would grant us a way to cover over the difficulties and the losses that come with being mortal creatures, but that we might come to see the entirety of our lives, even those losses, transfigured in his presence.

I started off by noting that our scripture readings today let us listen into *two* significant and mysterious moments of prayer in the life of Jesus. The second moment of prayer comes at a climactic point in Jesus’ life, when he is on the cross and is ready to breathe his last breath.

Crying with a loud voice Jesus says “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.” If Jesus’ first prayer taught us to hope in a life of communion with God and each other that transcends death without erasing our past, Jesus’ second prayer teaches us to come to terms with the fact that we are creatures and not the creator. Jesus’ prayer teaches us to be a people who accept that we cannot ultimately guarantee the endurance of our stories. As the writer of Ecclesiastes knew so well, death makes it so that there is no way to secure one’s name and reputation. But Jesus’ prayer on the cross teaches us to commend our spirit, our breath, our name and our reputation, our whole life to the God whose story draws all our stories into new life. We would do well to learn this prayer from Jesus and repeat it not only in our last moments but throughout our days: “God, into your hands I commend my spirit; my breath; my life. I entrust it to you so that whether I am at home in the body or away from the body (2 Cor. 5:9), I might please you who gave me breath.

In just a moment we will begin our candle lighting ritual. For those at home you are welcome to light your candle at any point once the music starts. For those of you worshipping in person, please come up one household at a time and take a candle from the basket. You can use the peace lamp to light your candle and then place it on the tray. As we light our candles this morning, we enter a sacred time of remembering. A time to remember loved ones we have lost, and to recognize the many other losses that we experience on our journeys. For some of us, these losses are fresh and the feeling still raw. For others, time has softened some of our emotions even though the loss is no less difficult. As we remember together as the body of Christ, as you light your candle, be aware that this is also a sacred time of communion too....the communion that Jesus prayed God would provide us in spite of death. And so, may we, drawn into communion

with Jesus, be drawn also together with those we have lost, knowing that nothing is finally lost on the breath of God.