

IN LIFE AND IN DEATH

**a sermon on Exodus 14:19-31, Romans 14:1-12, Matthew 18:21-35
September 17, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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“To everything, there is a season,” wrote the preacher. “a time to be born, and a time to die.”

Life and death. In a way, they are what *religion* is all about - because no matter how far we progress in science and technology, they are still the great “mysteries” of our existence.

It’s been another active hurricane season in the Gulf of Mexico. The death toll in the Caribbean and Florida are continuing to rise. The devastation from Harvey and Irma is massive, and humbling, and all we can do is shake our heads, and confess that we don’t understand why.

As happens whenever tragedy strikes – man-made, or otherwise – we have been reminded once again of how fragile and tenuous life can be.

Life and death. Paul’s words about them in our New Testament lesson sound almost ambivalent: “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” In his letter to the Philippians, even more so: “I am hard pressed between the two,” he wrote. “To live is Christ. To die is gain.”

But don’t let his tone fool you. Paul was all about life and living. The older he got, I am sure, the more he *thought* about his own death, and tried, I suppose, to *prepare* himself for it. Romans and Philippians were among the Apostle’s *later* works. So like the writer of Ecclesiastes, they were written by one who, approaching the end of a good, long - and *productive* - life was looking *back*, and assessing where he had been, and where he was headed.

Tragic deaths are different. They are about life being *stolen away*. They are about unrealized dreams – all the good that *might* have been.

Jesus' death was a tragic one, not just because of *how* it occurred, but because it occurred when he was just 33 years old. Think of how much more he could have taught us in another – say – 40 years or so of preaching and teaching. Tragic.

So yes, religion is about death, and “life *after* death.” It is about “salvation,” and “eternity.” But it is also about *life*.

It's about the *struggle* to keep life *going*, and even more than that, it is about filling life with *meaning* and *purpose* – “completing” it – precisely because we have no idea how many days we will be given on God's green earth.

The children of Israel as we encounter them in this morning's lesson were a people *yearning* for life. That's why they wanted out of Egypt. They wanted to live, and be free.

Back in Exodus 3, when the whole “drama” of their departure from Egypt began, God said to Moses, “I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians . . .”

And so in the act that Israel – and faithful Jews to this day – recognize and remember as God's most powerful act of “salvation,” – God parted the waters of the Red Sea, and they escaped their bondage.

Before I even realized that this text was our lectionary reading for the morning, the story came to my mind as I watched the almost surreal videos last week of Tampa Bay, and even *Mobile Bay* during Irma's arrival – with the USS Alabama aground because the storm had drawn in so much water from the gulf. And by the way, if you're looking for an explanation of how the parting of the Red Sea that doesn't defy “natural” circumstances or forces, that is clearly it. Tropical cyclones, while rare, do occur in the Arabian Sea, of which the “Red Sea” is essentially an upstream bay.

I remember my first trip to the gulf coast after hurricane Katrina in 2005. I was there just days after the storm, because I was asked to serve as a driver for the very first Presbyterian Disaster Assistance personnel to enter the area. Having spent ten years as a pastor in Mississippi Presbytery, I had been in all of our coastal churches, and knew my way around pretty well. We met in Oxford, and drove

down to Mobile, where we spent the night. And then the next morning, we headed west. Words can't describe that scene along the coast. Total destruction in every direction. Spray painted numbers on doors telling recovery workers how many bodies were inside.

And yet, despite the absolutely horrific scenes, my most *vivid* memory is of watching all of those good people *respond* to the tragedy - Tirelessly. Vigorously. Even heroically.

And I recall the response of our churches in the aftermath of Katrina - beginning with the hastily organized prayer services that took place almost *immediately*. And then the health kits for victims that arrived at the presbytery office by the *thousands* – which we're doing again in our response to Harvey and Irma. And then there were the work groups making their way south despite the risks – because people were in need, and that's what Christians *do* in such circumstances. There were special offerings, offers of homes to victims, and the beginnings of longer term plans.

And we *do* all of that because we, too, understand the *value* of life, and we know (as God knew and demonstrated in His dealings with Israel) that what God *intends* for us in this life is for our needs and even our deepest desires to be met.

Life. And death. And *new* life rising out of the ashes of a tragedy. To everything, there is a season.

It's true in big, dramatic ways - like Israel, fleeing the bonds of Pharaoh, and a city recovering from a natural disaster.

It's also true in smaller ways - like a person, regaining a sense of purpose after the death of a spouse, or a parent, or a friend; or plotting a new life course after the end of a career, or a relationship. It's the story of *every* life that is faithfully lived.

It would be easy to lose *trust* in God's providence and guiding hand. Except that when we look *back*, we find *countless* stories of lives and deaths, beginnings, and endings - and new beginnings.

And it is that *knowledge* - the knowledge that God always brings new life out of every death, every ending, that give us the *hope* to go on, even when our situation

seems hopeless.

And then, it is also our trust that, as we say in funeral liturgy, “life does not end with death – that the God who created us will care for us beyond the bounds of our vision.” Ultimately, it is that *conviction* about things eternal that keeps us going in the here and now.

Erik Erikson, one of my favorite Psychologists, in describing what he considered the pinnacle of human achievement in later human life, defined “wisdom” as “a kind of informed and detached concern with life itself in the face of death itself.”

The “Brief Statement of Faith,” which is the most recently written document in our *Book of Confessions*, begins with the words: “In life and in death, we belong to God.” With that affirmation as our starting point, we can endure whatever comes our way, be hopeful no matter what, find our *purpose* in life, and respond to life’s challenges and even its *tragedies* faithfully.

That is what Paul was getting at. His rock-solid faith in God’s *eternal* providence and care is what gave him strength to go on despite being shipwrecked (as the result of a bad storm, by the way), imprisoned, and ridiculed.

And because of that trust, we can be *certain* that God has a plan that is being worked out even as we speak, that will bring new life and hope to *whatever* in our lives is ending - just as God gave new life to the people of Israel in their miraculous exit from bondage in Egypt, and each time, out there in the desert, that they murmured, or turned away, or lost a battle to their enemies, or lost a king from the throne.

Yes, God was *there* for Israel. God “heard.” And in compassion, God *acted*. And God continues to do so. That is the *conviction* of our faith, despite *whatever* happens, whatever comes to pass, in this sometimes treacherous, unpredictable world.

Let us, this day, give thanks to God for His care and keeping of us all our days, and for the comfort and relief that is being extended to those in need in His name, as we continue to be strengthened and nurtured in God’s love, and become the people God is calling us to be.

To God be the glory. Amen.