

# **“In the Pits...Death Be Not Proud”**

**A Sermon by Allen C. McSween, Jr.**

**Fourth Presbyterian Church  
Greenville, South Carolina  
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PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: In the face of the stark reality of death, all our little words of comfort and consolation fail, for you alone, O Lord, have the words of eternal life. You alone can turn the darkness of death into the dawn of your new creation. Open now our hearts and minds to that which you would speak to us, that even in these dying days we may live with faith and hope and love; through Christ our risen Lord. Amen.

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON: Psalm 88

NEW TESTAMENT LESSON: 1 Corinthians 15:12-26, 53-58

“Death be not proud,” writes John Donne.

“Death be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou are not so...  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.”<sup>1</sup>

So writes the poet and preacher, John Donne, and so we as Christians believe and affirm every Lord’s Day, and every time we gather at the graveside of a loved one to bear witness to the resurrection of the dead. “Death be not proud... thou shalt die!”

And yet over the past days and weeks it would seem that Death has much of which to be proud. The list of Death’s most recent conquests is long and disdistinguished: Robert McNamara, Michael Jackson, Steve McNair, Karl Maudin, Farrah Fawcett, Billy Mays, Gale Storm, Ed McMahon, David Carradine, just to name the most recent and best known. I cannot remember a time when so many famous people have died in such a short span of time, often in such tragic circumstances. But add to their names the names of ones closer to home, like Jill’s mother and Robert’s father, and ones like Kline Cash and Hazel Linder and her daughter Gena, and Steven Tyler and his daughter Abby in Gaffney, and the gunman who murdered them. Then add to the list the names of ten beloved members of this church who have died in recent months. “Death be not proud?” How could the Grim Reader not be proud of a harvest like that?

And so in the face of the stark reality of death, we turn this morning to our psalm for the day, Psalm 88. The psalm is addressed to “the God who saves me,” and yet, as you heard, there is no word of praise or thanksgiving in the psalm. There are no pleas or petitions to God—only bitter complaints and lament, ending in complete darkness. The psalm is a real “downer.” Out of the Pit of despair, the psalmist cries out,

**“O Lord, the God who saves me,  
day and night I cry out before you....**

**For my soul is full of trouble and my life draws near the grave.**

**I am counted among those who go down to pit;**

**I am like a man without strength.**

**I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave,**

**whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care.”**

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<sup>1</sup> John Donne, “Death Be Not Proud”

That's about as low as one can get. Despair does that to people, you know. But is it true? Are the dead forgotten even by God? Are they cut off from God's care forever?

Deep in your heart you don't believe that and neither do I. But the fact that Psalm 88 is a part of Holy Scripture forces us to come to grips with the issues it raises. In his desperation the psalmist wonders out loud, **"Do you show your wonders to the dead? Do those who are dead rise up to praise you?"** That is not a question that can be taken lightly. Do all of our prayers and praise of the living God merely end in the silence of death?

Psalm 88 is unique in its unrelieved bleakness. And yet there are other voices in scripture that raise the same question. Job laments,

"There is hope for a tree, if it is cut down, that it will sprout again... But mortals die and are laid low; humans expire, they breathe their last, and where are they?... If mortals die, will they live again?" (Job 14:7,14)

That haunting question weaves its way down through all the pages of scripture, all the way down to the door of an empty tomb on the day of Jesus' resurrection. In his most extensive treatment of the resurrection, the Apostle Paul makes clear what is at stake in the words of Job and the psalmist.

**"If Christ has *not* been raised,  
your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.  
Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.  
If for this life only we have hoped in Christ,  
we are of all people most to be pitied."**

Our scripture lessons this morning lead us deeper than we are often inclined to go into an assessment of the power of Death in relationship to the living God. It is important that we hold both readings together—Psalm 88 and 1 Corinthians 15. If Psalm 88 were the only word, or the final word of scripture, then, as Paul says, our faith would indeed be "in vain," and we would be of all people "most to be pitied," because we have accepted and believed and bet our lives on a lie. If there is no resurrection of the dead—if there is no hope beyond the confines of this life--then what else can we say but that this mortal life is merely "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," that ends in the darkness of death and the silence of God. **"You have taken my companions and loved ones from me,"** laments the psalmist, **"the darkness is my closest friend."**

With Paul we ask, **"Where, O death, is thy victory?"** And Death replies, "Where? Isn't it obvious? My victory is everywhere you look. So resign yourself to that fact and make whatever you can of these dying days, before it is too late."

But there is an instinct deeply rooted in the hearts of us all that rises up against the arrogance of Death. The poet Edna St. Vincent Millay gives voice to that instinct.

I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground.  
So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been, time out of mind:  
Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely.  
Crowned with lilies and with laurel they go; but I am not resigned....  
Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave  
Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;  
Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.  
I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Dirge Without Music"

Resigned or not, Death sneers, still I win every time in the life of everyone who ever lived... “the beautiful, the tender, the kind, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.” And none of your wishful thinking can make it otherwise.

That is true, in part. None of **our wishful thinking** can wish death away. We are mortal. We are born and we die. In the psalm that Steve will preach on in two weeks, the psalmist declares, “The years of our lives are three-score and ten or even by reason of strength four-score, yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone and we fly away.” (Psalm 90) Much too soon in all too many cases.

There is a profound realism in scripture about death itself--not hopelessness, not resignation, but profound realism. The Bible views death in two different ways—ways that may seem contradictory at first. Death is viewed in scripture both as the normal end to life in creation, and as “the last enemy,” the spiritual power that seeks to rob life of its meaning and value. Both aspects must be taken into account--Death as the inevitable end of mortal life, and Death as the power that wages war against the life and love God gives.

Understood physically, death is the ending of life which none of us escapes, no matter how hard we may try or how wise or lovely or righteous we may be. Death comes to us all.

But if the reality of death is acknowledged honestly, it can help make the living of life more intensely precious and meaningful here and now. Death can serve as a stark reminder that we are vulnerable, dependent creatures who cannot secure our own lives by our own powers, and thus knowing that we must die can drive us into the outstretched arms of the Savior, in whom alone is life eternal.

Throughout scripture there is a link between the reality of death and the meaningfulness of life. The Methodist theologian Thomas Oden puts it simply.

“Those who take life seriously take death seriously. Those who take death seriously take life seriously. Where death is avoided, life is avoided. Only one who has accepted the reality of death is prepared to accept life.”<sup>3</sup>

On a more profound level, Alan Lewis, a professor of theology at Austin Presbyterian Seminary, wrote a moving essay on the biblical understanding of death shortly before his own death. In the essay Lewis identified three aspects of the biblical understanding of death which he labels **Consent, Confrontation, and Conquest**. **Consent** has to do with our acceptance of the limits of our mortality as creatures who come from God and belong to God. **Confrontation** and **Conquest** have to do with what God does in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Before death is viewed as “the last enemy,” that God confronts and conquers in Jesus Christ, Lewis says that death must first be acknowledged as a part of God’s good creation. Lewis writes,

“Perishability, which God has both given and indwelt, enhances rather than detracts from the loveliness of life; just as real flowers transcend the beauty of indestructible but artificial substitutes, precisely because they are so precarious and frail... Coming from dust and returning to it, we are summoned to value our dependence on Another, to accept our limitations and restrictions, to throw off the heavy burden of sole responsibility for our existence and entrust it back to its transcendent source. Likewise, our knowledge that life will not last forever, adds immeasurably to our gratitude for life, however short” it may be.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *Life in the Spirit: Systematic Theology* Vol. 3 (Harper:SanFrancisco, 1994) p. 379.

Lewis goes on to say when death is understood as the gracious limit to life in creation and embraced in faith, death for the believer can be experienced as the final chapter of life in which we offer back to God the gift of life God gave us. When the appointed limits to life are embraced in faith," Lewis says, we may "rediscover trust and wonder, thankfulness and peacefulness, in acknowledging that we are finite creatures and that that is very good."

Death can be understood biologically as a natural event which comes to all that lives, and thus it can be accepted as a part of life in creation. While every death brings sadness and a sense of loss, but not all deaths are tragic. When my father died of dementia, none of us in the family would have wished him to suffer a day longer. When death finally came, it came more as an awaited friend than as a dreaded enemy. It was the expected, and not feared, end of a long, full life lived intensely in service to God and love for others.

But the fact that the ordained limit of death can be accepted in faith does not thereby make Death less of "a spiritual enemy," which God confronts and conquers. Under the power of Sin, death is not merely the appointed limit to life. Death is a spiritual power that seeks to say No! to the promises and purposes of God; most of all to say No to love itself!

Death, the spiritual power, proclaims the great lie that love is futile and ultimately absurd. "Love anyone who is under my power," sneers Death, "and sooner or later I will take your beloved from you and leave you heart-broken. Go ahead and love, if you dare, but you'll be sorry. The more you love, the more you will suffer. So is the inevitable pain of love really worth it?" That's a question we answer with our lives more than with our minds.

Human love is never "resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground" And neither is God's love! The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is God's own refusal to be resigned to the shutting away of love in the darkness of death. God does not allow the beloved Son to be lost in death's dominion. God confronts death head on and conquers it. Paul declares,

**"For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive... He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death."** (1 Cor. 15:25-26)

Even when God seems far off and silent, even when our eyes are "dim with grief," and God appears to have "hidden his face from us," nevertheless, the final word belongs, not to death, but to the Lord and Giver of life, whose love is triumphant over all the powers of sin and death. In Jesus Christ all that Psalm 88 depicts has been taken into the very life of God, so that not even death itself can separate us from God's eternal love. So...

"Death be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou are not so...  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die."

"Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

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<sup>4</sup> Alan Lewis, "The Theology of Death and the Care of the Dying: Affirmations, Attitudes and Actions," *Insights: A Journal of the Faculty of Austin Seminary*, Fall, 1994, p.10