

Getting Ready to Die

Philippians 1:12-26

Sermon by Dan Schrock

March 22, 2015

Lent 5

¹²I want you to know, beloved that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, ¹³so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; ¹⁴and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear. ¹⁵Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. ¹⁶These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; ¹⁷the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. ¹⁸What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance. ²⁰It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death.

²¹For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. ²²If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. ²³I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; ²⁴but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. ²⁵Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, ²⁶so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

I once knew a man who did not die well. This man had a terminal illness, but instead of admitting to himself and others that he was going to die, he acted like he was going to live for decades to come. For example, he left the apartment he had been renting and went out and bought himself a house. Then he spent thousands of dollars redecorating the house and landscaping the lawn. As if that were not enough, he also bought a new car. Ironically he worked in the medical field and knew very well what illness he had, what condition he was in, and how quickly his disease was going to progress. Yet he pretended he still had many years left to live. I was with him in the final hour or two of his life. When death came, it came hard. He looked surprised, as if he had not expected death would ever happen to so charmed a person as he thought himself to be.

Getting ready to die, and to die well, happens in a series of small steps. Some of the small steps are things any of us can do at any point in our adult lives, such as preparing a will for your estate, setting up a living will and a durable power of attorney for health care, and contacting the church office for a funeral planning form where you can tell us

what songs and scripture readings you want us to use at your funeral. You can also plan your funeral in advance with one of the funeral homes in town. Over the years I've worked with both Yoder-Culp and Reith-Rohrer-Ehrert, and can recommend both of them to you.

If you're looking for an alternate source of caskets, you might try a small company right here in Goshen called Green Legacy Caskets. They're located close to our church building in a house on Greene Road between Clinton and Bashor. One of the partners is JD Smucker, who used to teach at Bethany. They build hardwood caskets by hand using local lumber. Their goals are to care for the environment, reflect a simple lifestyle, and promote financial stewardship. Their caskets cost \$750-1,000. You can find them on the web by searching for "Green Legacy Caskets."

Taking any of these small steps will help you to prepare physically, emotionally, and spiritually for dying.

Another step you can take will require only one hour of your time. You can watch a show on the internet called "The Undertaking," produced by PBS Frontline. This is a moving, sensitively-crafted documentary of Lynch & Sons, a funeral home in Milford, Michigan. You'll see funeral directors helping people plan for their funerals, visiting the dying in the hospital and nursing homes, and getting bodies ready for viewing. You'll see family members and funeral directors accompanying their loved ones to the crematory and to the cemetery. You'll watch gravediggers at work. One of the best parts of the documentary is a series of interviews with people who are dying themselves or who have family members who are dying. You will probably cry a little when you watch this, but that's actually a good thing. We established a long time ago in this congregation that crying is a normal part of life and we aren't apologetic about doing it. To watch this, just type "The Undertaking PBS" in your search engine and it will pop right up. This website also has a few resources for thinking about your own funeral.

We can also allow ourselves to ponder the death-like experiences that life puts in our path. These can include experiences of spiritual darkness such as the dark night. These can include physical diminishments like losing hearing in one ear or realizing

you're too old to play basketball anymore. They can include vocational events like losing a job or retiring from regular employment. In each of these death-like experiences, give yourself time to ponder and process what they mean for you. Talk to friends or family. Write in your journal, if you have one. Reflect on the larger meaning this event has for you. Let it enter into your praying. Wrestle with God about it, if you want to.

Perhaps the most important step you can take in getting ready to die is to let yourself relax into the care of God. I think this starts by becoming aware, in your bones, that you are now, and always will be, in the care of God.

- _____, you are in the care of God.
- _____, you are always in the care of God.
- _____, whether you live or die, you are in the care of God.
- _____, you live in God's care, for eternity.
- _____, you have nothing to fear—because you exist in God's care.
- _____, you live in the care of God, both now and forever.

This is the kind of conviction that Paul came to in Philippians 1, when he wrote openly and honestly about his own death. Because he loved God so much, he was happy to embrace his own death, leave this life, and enter into a new kind of life with God. But because he loved the people in the Philippian church so much, he was also happy to stay here a while. Do you hear how much inner spiritual freedom this man has? Do you hear how willing he is to let death come? There was a man ready to die well.

May you come to this same inner freedom. As you get ready for your own death, may the peace of God live inside you.