

## ***About Sermons to Share***

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<b>SERMON TITLE</b>	<b><i>The Pornography of Death</i></b>
<b>PREACHER</b>	The Rev. Tim Archibald
<b>LOCATION</b>	Kings Presbyterian Church, New Minas, Nova Scotia
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<b>SCRIPTURE</b>	John 11:17-44

Let's play a word association game. I say tree, you say.... I say money, you say.... I say music, you say.... I say death and you say... (We don't always know what to say). We even find it hard to use that word in the presence of death.

We live in a society that prefers to isolate death and dying from the flow of daily life – unlike most other societies in history. Yet as John Donne wrote: “Death comes equally to us all and makes us all equal when it comes.” We hope that we will be old and grey when it tolls for us, but that is not always the case. Death can snatch us away in the prime of life. Two weeks ago I was *shaken* when in the morning paper I discovered the obituary of a university classmate. People like you and I die every day. So how do we live in the here and now, so that when the bell tolls we can die well?

Some self-help literature these days is trying to say that there is nothing very sad, frightening or destructive about our own death, it is just an opportunity for personal growth! What rubbish! Death steals life; like a knife it severs bonds of love.

“Lord if you'd been here,” says Mary to Jesus, “my brother would not have died.” No, the Bible doesn't script in the emotion here, but I imagine she was angry as she said

it; angry at death itself and can't do anything about it. Mary's anger makes this story real. Tom Long quips: I'm glad that Jesus doesn't show up in the nick of time with a Band Aid and lollipop to say: "There, there death and loss do not hurt." No, in John's Gospel, as in your life, human beings really do get ill and die. Death knocks at Lazarus' door and not even Jesus, Saviour of the world can stop it.

As Long retells it: "'Death swaggers into town,' and says, 'I plan to take Lazarus in 48 hours. Show up by then or else.' Jesus responds, 'Before there was time, 'I am.' All time belongs to me. I do not march to your little calendar to come to bring the deep treasure of eternal life.'"

Here is the larger truth to which the story points, not that Jesus goes around raising corpses, but that he offers himself for all as the way to eternal life. "I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus says. "Those who believe in me, even though they die will live. And everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" The answer one gives to Jesus' question will determine, at least in part, whether we will face death in fear or in faith and whether we will die badly or whether we will die well.

We can be helped in our dying in the way we observe death, in our rituals. Read obituaries any day of the week and you will see that we are losing our way these days when it comes to funerals; we have "celebrations of life," yet the church is showing an inability to tell the gospel story at the time of death. Obituaries even for members of the church will say: "No visitation and no service by family request. Private committal."

Practices today de-emphasize the actual body; people have stopped coming to their own funerals. Viewing of the body at a wake is considered "morbid," part of what

Geoffrey Gorer calls the “pornography of death.” The body can be burned, buried, donated or disposed, but like all pornography, it should be done out of public view.

In North American Society today the two institutions that have the most influence in how people face death, hospitals and funeral homes, have altered the communal practices that once surrounded this life passage. Today there is often no “viewing” of the body, no tramping through the mud to the cemetery, no table full of casseroles waiting for the family back at home, no prolonged rituals of mourning, storytelling and eating so prevalent in previous generations. Christians have always helped each other die; today we die alone. No longer are funeral homes simply there to look after the body, funeral homes now place ads in yellow pages promising sympathy, care and peace of mind “when you need us most.”

As Tom Long points out, until recently Christian funerals were built on the metaphor of a saint journeying from this world to the next. The deceased is not crossing the river Styx, not travelling to the land of the dead, but for Christians crossing the Jordan River into the land of promise, flowing with milk and honey, into the presence of the living God. For Christians, the deceased is not a ghost to be feared or an evil spirit to be warded off, but a saint to be respected, honoured, loved and accompanied with psalms, hymns, and prayers the last steps of the way. The funeral represents the journey to God, on a journey to be part of the communion of saints to be with God. The community goes the last mile of the way.

The tradition of staying with the body in the time before the funeral, telling stories and sharing memories was as fellow pilgrims on the path. It was a symbol of the communion of saints and the unbroken connection with the saint who is “passing on,” not

just passed away. Mourners look at the face of the deceased in the coffin not because of a morbid curiosity about death, but because they are saying farewell to a sister or a brother.

I remember this journey motif so strongly at my Grandmother Archibald's death in the '80s. The wake was in the family home. On the day of the funeral the minister joined us, leading in prayer. After each had said their farewells, the lid was closed and my grandmother was carried from her home to the hearse and a motorcade of over 100 family members drove slowly through the community to the church. Following the funeral 400 people walked her to the cemetery and buried her.

It's not to say that there has to be a body; respect and honour can be shown if the body has been cremated. The image of the deceased on a journey from this world to the next is now being replaced with the image of a mourner journeying from grief to restoration. The Christian story tends to fade into the background while biographical comments about the deceased become front and centre.

We are reducing the rich drama of a Christian funeral, with its bold claims about life and death and mystery, to merely a grief-counselling "sharing time." Truly, a Christian funeral is nothing less than a bold and dramatic worship of the living God done attentive to and in the face of an apparent victory at the hands of the last enemy. In a funeral, Christians raise a fist at death; recount the story of the Christ who suffered death, battled death and triumphed over it; offer laments and thanksgivings to God who raised Jesus from the grave; sing hymns of defiance and honour the body and life of the saint who has died. Accounts of early Christian funerals reflect an almost defiant sense of

confidence and joy as they publicly processed through streets in white garments, sang songs and witnessed to the hope of the resurrection.

As followers of Jesus we cannot save death and dying for the end of our lives. St. Paul writes about our baptism involving us in dying with Christ. We die early in baptism with Christ and assert that, “we have already passed from death to life.” Baptism begins a process of dying to ourselves so that we may begin to live to God. In baptism eternal life becomes ours. Living with this awareness prepares for the dying of our bodies. Weekly we celebrate the resurrection; annually we remember Christ’s death and resurrection. Our life together is meant to nurture a confidence that God is actively working against the powers of death in all creation.

We cannot escape death, but God in Christ took on death so that we can pass from death to life. Having passed from death to life in baptism we live today, tomorrow and forever as new people, constantly being transformed into Christ’s eternal life, daring to trust the promise of the gospel’s great mystery: “We shall not all die, but we will all be changed.”