

**IN LIFE AND IN DEATH...**  
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In life and in death we belong to God. We say this every Sunday in our Proclamation, as we gather for worship.

In our lives, we say, God is the good shepherd leading us in right paths, amid green pastures, along still waters, always and forever welcoming us home, so that in our death we may indeed dwell in the house of our God forever.

The question is ... do we believe it?

Not in our heads, as a dispassionate intellectual treatise, but in the marrow of our bones. As a primal trust in the Life Principle itself, whose name our ancient forbears treated with such awe and reverence they would not even try to pronounce it. Whose essence today we fumblingly call "God."

Do we believe that every part of us, in every moment, in every breath, and into our eternal breath, belongs to the Life Principle itself ... to God?

According to modern day anthropologists who study American attitudes toward death and dying, the answer is no. We do not.

Dr. Helen Stanton Chapple, in her groundbreaking 2010 study on the subject, describes the prevailing cultural view of death in this country as a battle to be won, rather than a natural biological transition to be accepted and even embraced.

The process that every religious and spiritual tradition on the planet reveres as a sacred rite of passage, the process anthropologists tell us in fact gave rise to religion in the first place, has become instead an almost never ending cycle of life extending medical procedures, accompanied by an ideology of heroism that celebrates those who "win their fight" (against cancer, for example) with the not-so-subtle dismissal of weakness for those who "succumb."

This is a lie.

The truth is, no matter how "fit" we are, we will all die. Someday.

The question is ... what do we do about it?

A Buddhist sect in Thailand literally encourages its followers to meditate inside a casket. Some monks will even have a casket in their cell to function as their bed, so that every night as they go to sleep they practice facing the reality of their mortality.

That's one way to do it.

Maybe even a good way.

But I'm not quite ready to sign up for a group discount on caskets.

If we are trying to come to terms with death in the Christian tradition, we have King David, the lyricist.

When David's beloved baby boy dies suddenly, before he is even old enough to be named, he responds to the abyss by writing a song. Two songs in fact.

The one we know best (Psalm 23) we recite at funerals: The Lord is my Shepherd ... I shall not want ... he leadeth me beside the still waters ... he restoreth my soul ... yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil ... thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies ... my cup runneth over ... surely goodness and kindness shall follow me all the days of my life ... and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

It is a comforting psalm. A song of trust and acceptance. It helps so many of us come to terms with the reality of our mortality.

But it is not the first song David writes in the wake of his son's death.

"My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me!" is the first song David writes. Psalm 22 in our Scriptures. "I cry in the daytime," David rages, "but you do not hear me ... I cry at night ... I will not stay silent!"

"All my bones are out of joint," we can imagine David screaming into the microphone. "My heart is like wax."

"I am so devastated I do not even know if I can go on with my own life."

This first psalm, the one that follows immediately after the shock of David's loss, is a far cry from the still waters of a soul at peace with death.

This first psalm is a raging torrent of grief and anger ... WHY ... WHY ... WHY!?!

And that is how we really feel about death, is it not? The honest truth. Which is why I love the psalms so much. They tell it like it is.

We are right to cry out that death is unfair. Even a "good" death, if there is such a thing, even at the end of a long life. We are right to want to live forever. We are right to want the ones we love to live forever. We are right to love this life so much, to love *our* lives so much, that it feels like God is "taking" something from us when these mortal lives are done.

Jesus, himself, cries out with the words of this psalm at the moment of his own death. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

But it is also right to rest in the steadfast love of God that extends beyond the abyss that is our certain demise. To swim in the still waters of baptismal grace. To feast on life abundant at the table. To love our lives just a little bit more, in the knowing that they are not forever, as the second psalm does.

The truth is that God is with us in all of it. The rage and the grief. And the peace that passes understanding. And, if we take the incarnation seriously, in Jesus, God experiences all of it with us.

In the end, when we sing both psalms together, as two sides of the same coin, rather than as opposing conditions, we *do* come to know in our bones, as King David does, the steadfast love of God that really does

endure forever. And that leads us to proclaim with great assurance: in life and in death, we truly do belong to God.

Amen.