

November 12, 2023 – 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

It's been over 20 years now, but I still vividly remember the day I moved away from home for college. Leaving good ole' Brimfield, OH, where I had been born and raised my entire life, to travel 150 miles west to Ohio Northern University in Ada, OH. Leaving my home. Leaving my family. Leaving my church and friends and everything familiar to me.

But most of all, leaving it all for... what? I didn't really know. I mean, I had visited the campus. I had taken the tour. I had read the brochures. But I didn't really know what college would be like. I didn't know what the campus would be like. I didn't even really know what my roommate would be like. We met on move-in day. We were complete strangers to each other in every way.

And it was intimidating. Frightening, even. I was homesick before my mom and sister had driven out of the parking lot. Lost in the anxiety of the unknown. The big, black, ominous uncertainty of... the future. And whatever it held.

There's an old saying that there is no fear greater than the fear of the unknown. And we are confronted with that fear throughout our lives. Because every point in our lives is always a stepping stone to the next point in our lives. The future is always in front of us. And rarely is the future very well known.

Jobs and finances. Children and family. Health and retirement. They can be an absolute joy or a frustrating burden. And the worry and wonder about which they will be in the future is always on our minds, just a little.

And yet, these unknowns, as important as they each are, pale in comparison to the great unknown: death. The death of loved ones. But, most of all our own death. Death is always a big, black, ominous uncertainty.

Last week, on All Saints Day, we talked a lot about death. Mainly about the death of our loved ones. About how we deal with that grief in the funeral service. And what it is that I as a pastor need to tell you most on that sad day.

But All Saints Day isn't just an individual day. It's kind of it's own little season at the end of the church year. And the themes of All Saints Day have continued into this week as well. Not only in regard to the death of others, but in regard to our own death. And how we face this terrifying uncertainty.

That may sound a little strange coming from me. After all, last week, I stood up here and confidently told you that your beloved friend or family member is a saint in heaven and you have nothing to worry about. That you yourselves are simultaneously saint and sinner. And that in death, we cast off our sinful mortality and become yet another saint in the Kingdom of God. That's what you expect to hear, isn't it?

And, yes, that's all true. I'm not denying or taking back one word of it. But at the same time, it feels more than a little disingenuous for me to stand up here and tell you, "Death isn't a big deal. Don't worry about it."

If that were true, I wouldn't be taking a pile of blood-pressure medication at dinner every evening. I wouldn't be watching the news wondering if we're on the brink of war with Iran. I wouldn't feel the sadness that I do about loved ones who have passed away. We're lying to ourselves if we try to say that death doesn't worry us or frighten us or sadden us just because we're Christians.

Death is still an unknown and we are still human beings who fear the unknown. Even in our Christian faith, we must admit that. And Scripture does not describe death in detail. I don't know what it feels like to die. And surprisingly, the Bible doesn't tell us a whole lot about what either heaven or hell are like.

One of the best places is in Luke 16. There, Jesus describes heaven as resting in the bosom of Abraham. Imagine when you were a child and you ran up to your father or grandfather or somebody like that and got a big, warm, bear hug. That's heaven.

St Paul in our Epistle lesson and elsewhere describes heaven like falling asleep. It's like the rest of going to bed after a long day of work. Like the absolute peace and contentment of a pleasant dream, to enjoy until we're finally wakened once again. That's heaven.

Last week, we read in St John's first epistle that he doesn't even really know what heaven is like. All he can say is, "*What we will be has not appeared.*" Which is pretty vague. But in his vision of heaven in the Revelation, he describes it like a grand throne room, where all the saints stand before the altar of God, praising him. And their only concern, their only question to Him is, "*How long, O Lord?*" How long till this sinful world ends? How long until all the saints can be together again?

And when it comes right down to it, that's really our question as well. Because it's OK to fear death. In reason, of course. But fear it nonetheless. It is our punishment, after all. Think about that time in your childhood when you disobeyed your mother or father and got caught. And there's that moment after you get caught when you're just left to wonder, "How bad will my punishment be?" And the uncertainty is enough to drive you mad.

That's what death is for us. It's our penalty for sin and rebellion. Death is not what God wanted for us in the beginning, but it is what we chose by our actions in the Garden of Eden. And it is what we choose every day of our lives when we sin against God and one another.

So really, the fear of death isn't that much more than the fear of God. And as the prophet Amos makes abundantly clear in our Old Testament lesson, for sinners like us, the fear of God should be a very real fear. If, in our sinfulness, we're not afraid of God and afraid of His wrath and afraid of the penalty of death, death in this life and eternal death in hell, then we don't really get how seriously God takes our sin.

No, for us who have confessed our sins in faith, the question is not, "What is death like?" The question is really, "How long, O Lord?" How long do we have to suffer through fear and judgment and pain? How long does this penalty of death need to loom before us? How long until you end this uncertainty and show us what you have in store for those who love you. Those who are waiting with our lamps lit, ready for your return.

You see, that's the part of this that we can't forget. We will always fear death. We should, in a way, always fear death, because the fear of death is really just another way of looking at the fear of God. However, we don't need to fear death. There isn't actually anything to be afraid of. Death is uncertain for us because we can't see it. Because we've never experienced it. It's an unknown future. But it's not uncertain for God.

For God became man and experienced death on our behalf. He died and he rose again so that we might know with certainty that whatever death is like, it is cannot overpower our Lord. St Paul puts it this way: "*Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.*"

And so, as St Paul also says, we do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. We do not fear death like those whose only worry is about what death is like. Instead, we look beyond death. We look to the hope that is found in Jesus Christ.

The hope, yes, of falling asleep in His arms. But more importantly, the hope of waking up at His calling. Of waking up to something new and better, where death has died and every tear has been wiped away forever.

Until then, we still grieve. We still feel fear. Paul doesn't tell us to stop grieving. But he tells us to grieve with hope. To fear God with hope. By asking, "How long, O Lord, until this over?" How long, until all your saints are gathered again?

The future is not unknown. Because we look to the future with hope. We look to our death with hope. We grieve with hope. We encourage each other with these words of hope.

Because we do it all asking, not if, but when Christ will come again. Not if, but when we will meet Him in the air and find already beside him all those we have loved. Not if, but when. How long, O Lord, until you come again? And you take all our fear away. Amen.