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# I May Not Get There With You

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on October 23, 2011, by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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Last Sunday I talked about taxes. So this Sunday I thought I'd talk about death.

The death of Steve Jobs, the man who gave the apple the most attention it's received since the Garden of Eden, and the inventor of sleek devices modeled around the letter "i," brought renewed attention to a famous commencement address he made about his own illness. The speech included these words. "No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new."

What makes these words compelling is that here's a man who's found a technological solution to almost everything, who's done a corporate resurrection by becoming CEO of a company that ousted him only a few years before, and here he is in the role of dispenser of wisdom, appearing to say that even death can be managed if you go about it the right way. He's so engaging, and he's touching on such a raw nerve, that you desperately want to believe him. And you almost do. This is a man who's found a gadget to fix everything. Maybe, just maybe, he's offering us the greatest gadget of them all. Maybe it's called the iDeath.

But if you've lived through real bereavement and profound loss, I suspect you won't be taken in. Because when you've truly loved someone, and that person is uprooted from existence, and you're left with a gaping hole and an aching soul, there's no wise words or helpful gadgets that can replace the lifeblood you shared or assuage the dizzying dismay of grief. It's like having your lungs taken out so you can't breathe, or your stomach removed so you can't eat. It's as if a bomb blast had created a huge crater in your midriff. This is how W.H. Auden describes the harrowing emptiness of losing the companion he'd shaped his life around.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,  
My working week and my Sunday rest,  
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;  
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.

To be a Christian and to contemplate death is to locate yourself somewhere in the yawning gap between Steve Jobs and W.H. Auden. Auden's words are cathartic, because they plead that death empties life of all meaning, and they furiously and bitterly throw themselves against the cruel doors of death like a storm wave crashing relentlessly, savagely, but fruitlessly against a sea wall. And yet Auden's words are cleansing, because he pushes us to restore a sense of balance. He makes death the only thing he knows, and subjects all other truth to merciless dismemberment in the face of mortality. Sure, death is real, we want to reply: but death isn't all of reality, and it doesn't obliterate all that is good and true.

Meanwhile there's something hubristically grating about Steve Jobs' brisk and businesslike approach to death that again makes us look for a sense of balance, and yearn for Auden's melancholy. And yet surely Jobs is right at least in this, that maybe death, while sad, is yet not altogether bad. Maybe most of the things that are truly good about life wouldn't be so good if there were no sense of limitation to make them so rare and precious.

The death of a Christian is never *just* a tragedy, because there's always that element of hope tucked within it. And yet it *is* always a tragedy, and no amount of faith and trust and wise words and consoling gestures can take away feelings of aching loss and blinding grief. It's the same when we contemplate our own death. We approach death with fear and sometimes panicked resistance, a mixture of denial and paralysis – all of which are features of tragedy. But we also approach death with hope, with the sense that this life has been the

foretaste for the real thing yet to come, with the anticipation of having finished the appetizer and preparing our palates for the main dish, with the trust that the God who had the ingenuity to bring about this present existence must have something pretty special in store for the next. Tragedy and hope. Cross and resurrection. This is how we face death.

Deuteronomy chapter 34 completes the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, with the death of Moses inches short of Israel's long-awaited entry into the Promised Land. Let's see what wisdom we can discover from Moses as he faces up to the tragedy and hope of his own death. Moses' achievements are beyond comparison. Here is the man who went to Pharaoh and said, "Let my people go," and when Pharaoh said no, brought his people out of slavery, took them across the Red Sea, led them in peril and strife through the wilderness, and received the covenant from God at Mt Sinai. Here is the man who taught his people, interceded on their behalf, was furious with them and berated them, forgave them and loved them till the end. The book of Deuteronomy espouses a simple philosophy based around a straightforward equation: if you keep my commandments, you'll live long in the land I am giving you. It's confident that good deeds bring healthy rewards. And so it's constantly struggling with one great mystery: how come Moses, who's done such great and mighty things, doesn't get to enter the Promised Land?

Deuteronomy tries several times in different ways to make sense of why Moses doesn't get to lead his people into the Promised Land. It's not at all clear whether the reason is that Moses is being punished for the sin of his people or whether he's being denied entry to the Land on his own account. The point for us is, every death is like this. Every death leaves us with questions about how things might have been different or why life is so ironic and unfair. Every death is a failure, because no life attains the kind of completeness we long for and find truly satisfying, and every death leaves unfinished business. If we suffer, it's seldom entirely clear if it's because of someone else's failure, because of our own, or because that's just life and there is no discernible reason. We're bound to struggle for a meaning in our failures and disappointments and sufferings, but like Deuteronomy our certainty that there must be a reason doesn't mean we're going to find one.

Here are some famous words of a man torn between tragedy and hope, speaking on the night before his own death. "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!" Those words were spoken by Martin Luther King in Memphis, Tennessee, hours before his life was ended by a bullet to the cheek. King identifies with Moses. They both go to the mountain top. They both look over into the abundant land of Gilead and Dan and Manasseh and Jericho – the land of milk and honey. They both trust that their descendants will enjoy that land. But neither of them get there themselves. They're both poised between tragedy and hope.

What is our hope in the face of death? The language of hope is especially difficult to articulate today. This is because educated western cultures are infused with several trends that dismantle the notion of hope. There's a philosophical skepticism that we can ever know anything for certain. There's a sociological suspicion that any widespread opinion is likely to be a way for powerful voices to impose their perspective on vulnerable minorities. There's a cultural relativism that's reluctant to suggest any one conviction is better than any other. And there's a political pragmatism that's almost wholly concerned with achieving a limited set of this-worldly common goals. These forces are each healthy in their own way, but together they constitute a corrosive force that makes it very hard to envisage a shared human hope, and instead limits our imagination to each person trying to construct a life that can only be measured in its quantity of activity and its degree of experiential satisfaction.

In such a culture, two possible forms of hope present themselves. The first is to conform to the consensus that experiential satisfaction is all there is to hope for. Hope becomes the fulfilment of desire – for visible, tangible

possession, for deep, evocative feeling, and for abiding, gratifying comfort. The trouble is, death utterly destroys all of these hopes. So the only remedy is to make these desires and their fulfilment so all-consuming that we're able to forget or at least ignore death until the last possible moment. That's why funerals can be so bewildering today. We've evacuated the language of mortality from our shared vocabulary, such that death has become a baffling anomaly.

The second form of hope is to displace a vision for one's own survival and diffuse it into the well-being of all. This is what soldiers do in laying down their lives for their country or for its perception of the greater good. This is what victims' families do when they express an aspiration that the lessons learned from their loved one's death will alleviate suffering or prevent accidents or eliminate malpractice and thus enhance the lives of those to come. Even if most of us live by the privatized experiential satisfaction criteria, when it comes to public statements, this is the language we tend to adopt. One wit [Joseph Addison] noted, "We're always doing things for posterity, but what has posterity ever done for us?" There's a significant point here, which exposes the false pride of our attempts to leave a mark on the world. Percy Shelley characterizes this pitiful self-importance in his poem *Ozymandias*, where he describes a traveler coming upon a set of vast ruins lying in a wind-swept desert. On the ruins there's an inscription exhorting the reader to look on these mighty works and despair, for this is surely the mark of the king of kings. And yet here they are now, great trunkless legs of stone, adrift in the trackless desert, a withering symbol of human vainglory. Those shapeless, amorphous, devouring sands are a telling metaphor for the ultimate destiny of a life without God.

Perhaps most of us fuse these two forms of hope, seeking in work, and family, and a network of friendships some kind of a blend of the experiential satisfaction of the self and the sense of contributing to a greater and one-day-achievable social good. But is this real hope? Is this really much more than an effort of will and imagination and a collective determination to make human endeavor attain a permanence it can never realize? Haven't you walked away from many a memorial service thinking, deep down, "That was all very well, but was it really much more than deeply-felt and eloquently-expressed rage against the dying of the light?" Doesn't our cold-hearted truthful sobriety realize that the candle burnt out long ago, and the legend pretty soon will?

There is no hope outside God. That's a bleak realization. But flip the coin over, and we find that there's limitless hope *in* God. Truly limitless. Literally infinite. How much time and thought and effort and energy we expend trying to find hope elsewhere! But there is none. When you become a Christian you enter a realm of boundless hope in God. But there's no going back. Leave that realm, and you realize how empty and fabricated and sentimental and hubristic and futile all other grounds for hope are. There's nowhere else to go. Nowhere else, that is, to find hope. The cross of Christ tells us that our hope is not without tragedy, not without indescribable cost to God. And many of our lives confirm it. But the resurrection of Christ promises us that out of fear and suffering and tragedy and death arises never-ending, overwhelming, beyond-describing, ever-flowing life in God. The invitation of hope is, Are you ready to enter this life at your moment of death? The challenge of hope is, If so, *why not start living it now?*

I want to tell you about two men who together gave us a picture of the cross and resurrection, the tragedy and the hope, of facing death in God. Joachim Neander was a seventeenth century German Calvinist. Like Moses and Martin Luther King, he was on the brink of death, in his case at the tender age of 30, when he wrote the famous words, "All my hope is firmly grounded in the great and living Lord." In another translation the verse ends, "Me through change and chance he guideth, only good and only true. God unknown, he alone calls my heart to be His own." A short time later Neander was dead, a victim of tuberculosis. God alone had called his heart to be God's own. Two hundred and fifty years later, almost to the day, the English Poet Laureate translated Neander's hymn and sent it to the famous composer Herbert Howells. Howells was deep in grief after the death from spinal meningitis of his 9-year-old son Michael. Howells received the hymn text at

breakfast time and he didn't move from his chair until he'd composed the tune that we sang as our processional hymn today. Howells was profoundly moved by what these words said about the interplay of tragedy and hope, of cross and resurrection, in the face of death. He was overwhelmed by how these words described his grief and yet faith in the face of the death of his son. And so, looking into the unknown, like Moses on the mountain-top, in gratitude to the faithfulness of Joachim Neander, in tribute to his 9-year-old son, and in praise of the God on whom all his hope was founded, Howells named this tune, "Michael."