

Sermon: Death is Not the End

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles Presbyterian Church, April 2, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Death is the great equalizer, the relentless Grim Reaper that has no regard to age or wealth. It takes away precious child from stunned parents, leaving them to grieve their loss for the rest of their lives. It deprives wife and children of their breadwinner, their protector, leaving them to fend for themselves in a hostile world. It robs aging spouses of their life-long companions, their best friends, forcing them to face the same death alone.

Sometime it arrives suddenly, unexpectedly; other times it approaches slowly, like a predator circling the preys, taunting its victims of that inevitable end. Sometimes it consumed its victims en masse; other times it seems to delight in targeting individuals. It employs a variety of methods, but rarely does it not inflict unspeakable terror and pain. Death, truly is humanity's greatest enemy, but **death is not the end.**

In the Ancient Near East, the context where the Bible originated, death was described as 'the land of no return'. The Hebrew term 'Sheol' pictures the realm of death as deep under the earth, while its entrance is compared to a deep pit (Psalm 88:4-6). Those who venture into this land are cut off from God and from the community of faith (Psalm 6:5; 30:9; 88:10-12). They spent their time, which is eternity, in utter darkness while eating dirt. A trip to the underworld, with very rare exception, is a one-way ticket, yet **death is not the end.**

Despite death's great power and hostility over humanity, it is ultimately under God's sovereignty. Ironically, the Bible tells us that death finds its origin in God. It came about as the result of humanity's first disobedience. In the book of Genesis, when Adam and Eve took and ate that forbidden fruit, death accompanied sin into the world, and had its powerful grip over humankind ever since, yet (you may have already guessed) **death is not the end.**

For the past 5 weeks, I have journeyed with the Bible Study group. Together we have read and reflected and discussed in detail the Passion narrative of Jesus Christ, according to Matthew, in chapter 26-27. We had

looked into the betrayal of Judas, his initial scheme, then reversal to no avail. We came upon the scene of the Last Supper which sets the template for the Holy Communion — the words of institution in 1 Corinthians reminding the community of faith: ‘Do this in remembrance of me’. We visited the garden of Gethsemane, joined in the prayer of Jesus in his last ditch effort to shake the hand of God, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” We witnessed the unjust trials of Jesus, first the religious one before Caiaphas the high priest, then the political one under Pilate the Roman governor. “Are you the Messiah, the Son of God? Are you the king of the Jews?”, they demanded. Jesus gave them the same inexplicable reply, “you said so.”, knowing full well his destiny, his appointed time, his kairos was solely in God’s hand. Death on the cross was unfortunately the destination, yet **death is not the end.**

The arrest, the trials, the repeated mocking of Jesus scattered the community of faith. Even Peter, his closest disciple, three times denied knowing Jesus. However, faith was not extinguished. Faith flickers in the act of the woman anointing Jesus with very costly perfume. Faith lingers in the act of Simon of Cyrene carrying the cross of Christ, and in the generosity of Joseph from Arimathea, yielding his own tomb to Jesus. Faith flickers in the words of one of the two robbers crucified alongside Christ, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Faith lingers from the mouth of the centurion, before the crucified Christ, “Truly this man was God’s Son!”

Faith flickers and lingers with hope that if God brought death because of the disobedience of humankind, what was God about to do with the ultimate obedience of this one man, the Son of God. The earthly ministry of Jesus ended in death, yet in faith however dimly, we are gathered here today, to proclaim that **death is not the end.**

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**