

In the Midst of Life

“We are born to die. Not that death is the purpose of our being born, but we are born toward death, and in each of our lives the work of dying is already under way.”

“Be assured that I neither fear to die nor refuse to live. If it is to die, all that has been is but a slight intimation of what is to be. If it is to live, there is much I hope to do in the interim.”

-Richard John Neuhaus

Thoughts of Easter and resurrection are still very much with us. In the past few weeks signs of spring and new life have burst forth, and the world is ablaze with color and texture and light. The intensity of it all is breathtaking. Delighting in the beauty of it all, it is easy to see why spring is so often the metaphor of choice for resurrection. Yet precisely in the midst of all the earthly signs of resurrection glory, I am reminded that death is still the word that must be spoken and understood before we can speak of or comprehend the resurrection. Perhaps while we have the light of Easter we would do well to prepare for it.

Our congregation is blessed by the presence of many who defy all the statistical tables with regard to life expectancy, so it is no surprise that comments about funeral plans and preferences are something I hear quite often. People will say after someone else’s funeral: “Now that’s the kind of funeral I want;” or “Y’all need to remember to sing that song [or read that text] at my funeral;” or “I really would like to be cremated [or to give my body for research].”

All too often, however, when serious illness or death does come, loved ones are left with the responsibility for making decisions under enormous emotional stress and the pressures of time constraints. What a gift it is to them when advance directives have been prepared for medical situations. What relief there is when they know where copies of the will and other documents are kept or where the burial should take place. What comfort there is for them when they feel they can honor their loved one by giving expression after death to the wishes expressed in life.

If I could I would require every member of the church to attend a seminar titled “Reflections on Death” or something similar. We’d read a bit from the Bible, speak honestly about death and dying and about our faith.

We’d talk about the nature and purpose of a Christian funeral service and about decisions the funeral home will require. We’d learn about living wills and medical powers of attorney and other legal documents necessary to express your wishes with regard to medical treatment at the end of life and to empower those you love to carry them out on your behalf. The last session might be one at which those whom you have appointed custodians of your wishes are in attendance so that you can go over all of it with them.

Do yourself and your family a favor. Take some time now to do a little reflecting on the details attending death in our culture. Should the service be held at the church or at the funeral home? Should sympathizers send flowers or would you prefer gifts be made to the church or your favorite charity? Make some notes about the funeral or memorial service you'd like to have. Be mindful of the emotional 'freight' your choices of scripture and hymns might carry. Let your service be a celebration of your life and your faith. Draw up a living will. Designate a medical and financial power of attorney. Take whatever steps are needed to empower your family to act in accordance with your wishes. Consult with your family, your pastor and an attorney. Place copies of your notes and related documents with other important documents and on file with the church and funeral home. Give copies to family and/or trusted friends. After all, if you have a plan but no one knows you keep it in the bottom drawer behind the out-of-season sweaters, what good will it do anyone?

Do all this no matter what your age, for as the UM graveside committal service reminds us: "In the midst of life, we are in death..." Yet while we live there is much we can do to bear witness that death does not have the final word.

Joy and peace in this Eastertide,