

Laurie McKnight Chaplain

Texts: 2 Samuel 7:12, Psalm 89: 20,29, 36,37, Psalm 23:1-6

July 21, 2024

“In Life and Death, We Belong to God.”

Good morning! My name is Laurie McKnight. I am an ordained teaching elder, a minister of word and sacrament in the Presbyterian Church USA, and I am a member-at-large of the Presbytery of Southern New England; I am a clergyperson working in a ministry approved and validated by the Presbytery. I am a second-career pastor, after 20 years working at AT&T in New Jersey, and after 8 years leading Presbyterian churches in upstate New York and northeastern Kentucky, I have been a hospice chaplain for the past 10 years.

I am a lectionary preacher. That means that I let the Holy Spirit move where she will, but I also use the “assigned” scripture passages for each Sunday that I preach. PC-USA and other denominational preachers CAN use the revised common lectionary, but they don’t have to. We have free will, even in the pulpit! I like to use those “assignments” each week, because they give me a jumping off point. I don’t have to pick my favorite scripture reading – which, let’s face it, would probably be from among the same dozen or so scriptures. I read through each suggested scripture lesson for each Sunday, and I look for how the Holy Spirit speaks to me and stimulates my thoughts and my emotions and my faithfulness and my sense of call, and I seek to discern a message relevant to both the text and to our current, present-day lived reality. One of the lectionary scriptures “assigned” for today was the 23rd Psalm. Would you read it again with me as it’s printed in your bulletin? As a pastor and as a hospice chaplain, I have had the privilege of presiding at several funerals and memorials and celebrations of life services. Psalm 23 was read or recited at almost all of them. The King James version with the beautiful Elizabethan language is usually the one that’s read. That might be the version many of you have memorized.

I was Bill Fish’s chaplain, for the 10 months he lived at the CT Hospice inpatient facility in Branford. I brought him bulletins from Sunday worship services here at this church; I worship here whenever I’m not preaching elsewhere. I was aware that Bill was still participating in church committee meetings on his laptop from his hospice bed. He was always hungry for news from this church. I couldn’t just *bring* him the church bulletins – I had to *read* them thoroughly to him – of course he could read them himself, but he couldn’t hold the bulletin to read it, and he couldn’t put on his reading glasses himself. I also had to tell him about the contents of the sermon (so I had to pay attention!), and often I brought to him and read to him from the sermon manuscripts that are in your narthex – I grabbed as many different ones as I could find on my way out every Sunday that I was here.

I read all manner of verses of scripture to Bill – even the entire book of Revelation at his request – and then we discussed at length what we had read. Bill said he had never read Revelation. Have you? As all the volunteers at hospice have told me, and I will tell you myself, the volunteers got more – they think they were *blessed* more – than the patients they visited with. I think I got more out of *our* visits – I was blessed more by Bill than Bill was blessed by me – in our time together. After Bill died in February, on the day after my birthday (!so I will always remember the date!), your Pastor Steve Jungkeit and I shared an email exchange about death and dying and grieving. I sent Steve photos of the service the hospice staff had in memory of Bill. Our average length of stay for hospice patients is 2.3 days – most patients are very close to death when they come to us – and most of my chaplaincy ministry is with family members who are about to start grieving – we call that

anticipatory grief. But Bill was with us for 10 months, and the entire staff got to know Bill and his family very well, so we felt we needed to process, on our own, the loss of this patient we had all gotten to care so much about.

I also sent to Steve a picture of the hospice room where Bill spent those 10 months, and Steve had been many times to visit Bill there. The room looked very different with Bill not in it – and none of Bill’s signs or decorations or belongings on the walls or windowsill. The entire hospice staff was nervous about who would be the next hospice patient in that room. The room remained empty for a good amount of time after Bill had died and the room had been cleaned and rearranged. We still call it “Bill Fish’s room.”

Steve wrote an email back to me, “Thanks for these photos. The room seems transformed, and kind of ghostly. Even the pictures make me miss seeing Bill there... I imagine there’s a heaviness that comes with that work – a goodness too – but also a heaviness from dealing with terminal cases all the time. It’s a powerful thing you do, and I’m grateful that there are those, like you, who are willing to accompany folks all the way to the end, day after day. Thank you for your ministry.” I wrote back to Steve, “I agree about Bill’s room – it’s not really his, anymore. Ghostly, indeed. Death is a funny thing, and we all have different experiences with it and reactions to it. I have never had a ‘bad’ death experience (at least, not in my formative years), and because of my faith, I know that death is not the last word, and it’s not the worst thing that can happen to someone (you know the Frederick Buechner quote about the worst thing not being the last thing, yes?). And I know you know that we all have different gifts (same Spirit yada yada yada), so death seems to really be my jam. I don’t feel the heaviness, but others do. And I work to be somber and circumspect enough when I’m with others, when they need that heaviness. It’s not *my* feelings that are important anyway – it’s the accompaniment of others on their journeys, and the recognizing and the dignifying of their feelings. I know you know this. All that just to say that hospice work is not a heavy lift for me, as it might be for others. It’s a privilege to be with patients and families at the time of death, and believe it or not, it rejuvenates me! I love the work.”

Steve wrote back to me, “Real briefly, your words about death, and ministry to the dying, are excellent. I’ll say yes, I do know those things, but I don’t always remember them, or remember them well enough. And so they’re very helpful. A question: do you have a sermon in you that touches on your work, and that delves into some of the themes you shared? I think it would be really helpful to our community, especially given all the death that we’ve experienced this past year. We did 30 funerals in the 2023 calendar year, and we’re on pace for something like that this year too. Your insights and experience would be really valuable.”

So here I am, the insightful and experienced angel of death! And yet, what a coincidence, what a God-incidence, that Psalm 23 was one of the lectionary readings “assigned” for this morning. Some of us feel more strongly than others of us, that God is with us in life and in death. I’ve been with families who were angry at God as their loved one lay dying. Some of those families didn’t want me to come into their loved one’s hospice room, and some of those families let me in, and yelled at me for *theodicy* – that word that helps us confront why God allows bad things to happen to good people. Families will say to me “he – she – they – never hurt anyone – they always did the right thing – they went to church – they treated everyone well – they prayed – they were kind” – the list is always long – “so why is God letting him – her – them – die like this?” And I have no answer. I can’t tell them why. Even if I had an answer – *the* answer – it wouldn’t help how they were feeling at that moment. My job, as I said before, is to validate their feelings. What they’re feeling as they’re losing their loved one is painful, and scary, and anger-inducing. Life is not fair. I give them

permission, if they need it, to be mad at God. I've been with family members who have punched walls in their grief, which sometimes looks like anger. I've been with family members who have vomited or fainted in their grief, which sometimes looks like fear. I've heard family members say, "I don't know how I will be able to live without them," which is as true a statement as I have ever heard. Sometimes hospice staff think *that* statement might be a form of suicidal ideation – but it's not. The bereaved – the family member who's left after death – really *can't* imagine what life will be like without their loved one.

Other families want their loved one to suffer before they die, and to die in pain. I know this sounds horrible, but there's love behind this desire. For religious Christians who are aware of how Jesus died, in pain and suffering on the cross, there is the thought that pain purifies our souls, like fire purifies silver, and our own pain brings us closer to the suffering of Christ. If we suffer like Jesus did before he died, the thinking is that *our* death will be closer to *his*, and we will join him in heaven with greater understanding of all that he has done for us.

The hospice staff has discussions about moral injury – hospice staff members are stressed when they see a patient die in pain and suffering, when they didn't have to. We are unable to change a family's theology or belief system at the time of a patient's death, but we can hold a hand – the patient's hand or different family members' hands, and we can soothe brows and we can hug or hum and sing songs. We learn by doing; we read the room, and we do the best we can. We stay flexible. And I am not the only one who prays.

At least once each week, sometimes more often, a dying patient will tell me they see someone in their room: a parent or spouse or sibling or friend or someone else who has gone on before them. This happens far too often for me to write this off. Just because *I* don't see that person doesn't mean that they aren't there. We call these death bed visions. We do not call them hallucinations, because of the negative connotations associated with hallucinations. These death bed visions are very real to the people dying in their beds. The Celtic cultures – Scots and Irish especially – talk about "thin places" – places where the veil that separates this world and the next – has thinned, or has been removed entirely. Thin places allow us to be in two worlds at once – the world of the living, tangible, touchable people, and the world that holds the souls that are more ephemeral. It's like that movie "Brigadoon", where a magical Scottish village appears for one day, every 100 years. We just get a brief glimpse of the shift in energy between the two worlds. Google the words "thin places" if you'd like to go down a rabbit hole – there is even a website for a company called Thin Places Mystical Tours – if you need an idea for your next vacation. The fact that this tour company exists at all tells me that people are hungry for this kind of communion, and that they desire to see their long-lost loved ones and loose themselves from the limits we place on space and time.

Some families have asked me to pray for death – that death will come more quickly than slowly, if they sense their loved one is suffering, and that there's no quality of life at all anymore for the person in the bed. Other families have asked me to pray for complete and total healing. And I do. If that kind of prayer is what will give the family peace (and it might give the dying patient peace, as well, knowing that their family loves them enough to request a prayer of this magnitude), then I pray the prayer they've asked me to pray. Maybe healing and wholeness, maybe "cure," really, is rejoining our Creator, meeting God face to face, and calling God friend. I say to my patients (that are still alert before they die) that they will know all the answers to all the questions of the universe before any of the rest of us. I tell them that **NOBODY KNOWS** what happens next – **NOBODY KNOWS** – we all know what we think is true, what we think will happen, what we

believe in, but really, NOBODY KNOWS. I ask them to come back and let me know. They smile or laugh at this, but so far, I still have questions.

In Psalm 23, we are abiding peacefully with our Lord. There's cool, still water, there are green pastures, we're not afraid because God is with us. God feeds us at a banquet table – and we're not afraid even though the table is set in the presence of our enemies. We know that God will keep the enemies from harming us, and God may even turn enemies into friends, as we realize that all of our quibbles and war-mongering don't matter in the grand, eternal scheme of things. We're anointed with oil – like some of my Roman Catholic and Episcopalian patients request, and I get a local or on-call priest to come anoint them with oil as they receive the Sacrament of the Sick. Our cups run over – they overflow, because even in death, we are blessed. Goodness and mercy follow us because God decrees it so, and we get to dwell in the house of the Lord forever. We go to that mansion with many rooms that are already prepared for us. Maybe you believe in that and maybe you don't, but again, NOBODY KNOWS.

If, after you google about thin places, you'd like to experience another rabbit hole, I recommend that you google about Near Death Experiences (NDE's), and you will come across the book *In My Time of Dying: How I Came Face-to-Face with the Idea of an Afterlife*. This book is written by award-winning journalist Sebastian Junger, who also wrote the books *Freedom, Tribe, War, A Death in Belmont, Fire, and The Perfect Storm*. Sebastian Junger had a near death experience, and it changed his theology – how he thought about life and death and God and time. I recommend this read. It was recommended to me by the hospice medical director I work with. I found it fascinating. There are so many wonderful quotes I'd like to share with you. Our call to worship this morning comes from the pages of this book. Junger saw his long-dead father when Junger was being treated in a hospital emergency room. Junger writes, "He appeared when I needed him most. It was quite possibly his greatest act of love toward me." Junger writes, " 'Reality' is just a boundary we can't see past." He closes his book by saying, "I couldn't really know life until I knew death, and I couldn't really know death until it came for me. Without death, life does not require focus or courage or choice. Without death, life is just an extraordinary stunt that won't stop." And finally, he writes, "We're all on the side of a mountain, shocked by how fast it's gotten dark; the only question is whether we're with people we love or not. There is no other thing – no belief or religion or faith – there is just that. Just the knowledge that when we finally close our eyes, someone will be there to watch over us as we head out into that great, soaring night." May it be so. May we all rest in peace. Amen.

2 Samuel 7:12

7:12 When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body,

Psalm 89

89:20 I have found my servant David; with my holy oil I have anointed him;

89:29 I will establish his line forever, and his throne as long as the heavens endure.

89:36 His line shall continue forever, and his throne endure before me like the sun.

89:37 It shall be established forever like the moon, an enduring witness in the skies.

Psalm 23

¹The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. ²He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; ³he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. ⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me. ⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

Gone From My Sight by Henry van Dyke

I am standing upon the seashore. A ship at my side spreads her white sails to the moving breeze and starts for the blue ocean. She is an object of beauty and strength. I stand and watch her until, at length, she hangs like a speck of white cloud just where the sea and sky come to mingle with each other.

Then someone at my side says, "There, she is gone." Gone where?

Gone from my sight, that is all. She is just as large in mast and hull and spar as when she left my side, and she is just as able to bear her load of living freight to her destined port.

Her diminished size is in me, not in her. And just at that moment when someone at my side says, "There, she is gone," there are many other eyes watching her coming, and many other voices ready to take up the glad shout, "Here she comes!"

And that is death.