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Date: April 10, 2011
Sermon Title: Death and Dying: A Prelude to Easter
Scripture: Psalm 23
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Psalm 23 (King James Version)

The LORD Is My Shepherd

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

We started a new Bible study on the "HAPPIEST Chapters in the Bible," and today I'm preaching on "Death and Dying." I've used the 23rd Psalm for both because the truth is the 23rd Psalm is about death and dying, and it is about living happily. It recognizes that death is part of life.

Culturally. Spiritually. Physically. Financially. Politically. Death and dying consume us. We think about it. Worry about it. Fight it. Obsess over it. Listen to the debates about health care or the budget. What do we hear about? Death penalty. Medicare costs. We can't afford "baby boomers." Each side declaring the other is trying to kill Grandma. Pharmaceutical companies work hard to find new drugs that will cure sickness or extend life. And yet a hospital in Atlanta had to shut down its dialysis center, forcing scores of poor people to simply face reality: their lives were coming to an end.

We live in a time when science and medicine offer the hope of living longer and living better, yet maybe society can't afford that. The promise is real. The politics are tough. The costs are prohibitive. The ethics are murky. And we are all in the middle.

So where is FAITH? The Bible is surprisingly blasé about death. Death just is. Get used to it. No drama. The Bible tells us, "For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, a time to die." (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2) The same chapter gives us an equally famous verse, "From dust we came, to dust we shall return." (Ecclesiastes 3:20) That's where we get the old saying, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," recalling the creation story in Genesis where God creates us from the earth, the ground, and that's where we end up, buried.

In that same practical, matter-of-fact, almost bland way, the Bible says "Like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be recovered, so we must die." (2 Samuel 14:14)

"The length of our days is 70 years, or 80 if we have strength ... yet they pass quickly, and we fly away." (Psalm 90:5-10)

"For we can all see wise men die, and likewise the foolish and the senseless – we all die." (Psalm 49:10)

"Our days on earth are like a shadow ... swifter than a weaver's shuttle... a mere handbreadth ..." (1 Chronicles 29:15; Job 7:6; Psalm 39:5) and, in a verse that is supposed to be hopeful,

"God says, 'Men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets, each with a cane in hand because of their age.'" (Zechariah 8:4) And, "the Lord sweeps us away."

All in all, a death just is. Get over it. No big deal. But it IS a big deal! Life is a big deal. End of life is a big deal. We treasure life. We worry about death. And we hope like heck that Easter is true. In fact, it's Easter that motivates this sermon. On Easter, this church will be packed. We will be happy. We will look great. Our music will soar! And our Scripture will be these verses:

"Why are you crying?" (John 20:15)

"Why do you seek the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:5)

"Do not be afraid." (Matthew 28:5)

"Jesus is not here." (Luke 24:6)

"He has risen from the dead." (Matthew 28:7)

"Christ is risen." (Luke 24:6)"

It's like point/counterpoint: Death is real. Eternal life is real. Grief is real. Joy is real. Doubt is real. Faith is real. The grave is real. Resurrection is real. Loss is real. Triumph is real. So I just decided that our joy would be more joyful, our faith would be more faithful, our hope would be more hopeful, our triumph would be more triumphant if we took this one Sunday, a little before Easter, to look death and dying right in the eye, and not blink.

That's the promise of the 23rd Psalm, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil ... for thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies ... and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." That's real stuff. It says to us there is a valley of death, there is evil, there are enemies, death is real. Things that hurt us, frighten us, worry us — are all real. But they don't win.

Today is April 10th, the 100th day of 2011. And I have already had three self-diagnosed terminal diseases. My doctor can't look at me with a straight face. Qwest Diagnostics says I'm not allowed to have a blood test every day. And my better half would like me to dwell a bit more on Easter's promise and less on my personal pessimism.

It's possible that I obsess on death and dying. My father called me this week by mistake. He said he was calling an old friend to make his formal goodbye. My father is 87, his friend is 85, so I immediately think, *Am I missing something? Is my father trying to tell me something? What's up with this "formal goodbye"?* It turns out their phone call had been disconnected during their conversation, and he thought he should call and give a formal goodbye.

But I'm not alone in this obsession. Everywhere I look I find references to death and dying and afterlife! Jim Calhoun, the fabulously successful UConn men's basketball coach, who just won another national championship, was reflecting on beating cancer and whether he would retire. He said, "I don't want to be the guy with the most victories in the graveyard. I don't want to be the guy with the most money in the graveyard. I don't want to be in that graveyard!" (Serby, Steve. "UConn's Calhoun Will Go Down as One of the Best." *New York Post* 28 Mar. 2011: 62. Print.)

The Sundance film Festival featured a heart-wrenching movie "How to Die in Oregon," a documentary that follows a lovely lady with liver cancer all the way to her physician-assisted suicide. Her husband says, "My wife understood the meaning of her own life. This element may seem like a story about dying, but actually it is very much a story about living." (Barnes, Brooks. "Unflinching End-of-Life Moments." *The New York Times* 25 Jan. 2011: C1-C5. Print.)

Even *The New York Times* bestseller list for nonfiction paperback has the book *Heaven is for Real*, the true story of a 10-year-old's near-death experience, his journey to heaven, his visits with his great-grandfather and John the Baptist and his unborn sister and his description of Jesus. ("Best Sellers: Paperback Nonfiction." *The New York Times* 12 Mar. 2011: C1. Print.)

So I'm in good company, obsessing on death, even while we head for Easter. Part of it, I guess, is my profession. I've done almost 1,100 funerals. I do 300 to 400 hospital visits a year. I am with the sick and dying. I know death intimately. I read the obituary page religiously.

Just this Friday's *Connecticut Post* obituary page: Ted Meyer, 89, and Dorothy Farkas, 72, both of Easton, both long-term members of the United Congregational Church in Bridgeport. Giuseppe Cusana, 77, died in Italy. Josephine Biros died on her 74th birthday. Bianca Spodnik, 13, became one of God's angels on Monday, her obituary said. And our own Robert Fitelson's dad, Eugene, a World War II prisoner of war survivor died with all his family right there with him. And our beloved Amy Lyster, 98, whose life we will celebrate next Saturday.

Just one day's obituary page, just one glimpse of life and sorrow and hope, right around here; 25 obituaries, all expressing love. All inviting faith, inviting you to church and synagogue, inviting you to light a candle, make a gift, express your love. Each in some way expressing eternal rest, God's presence, personal space, family pride, deep sorrow, and great hope.

That's the same mix that drives our religion and the same mix that gives us Holy Week. Our whole religion and our whole human experience are summarized in Holy Week. You've got joy and hope on Palm Sunday, then intrigue and suspense. There's fellowship, questions, and betrayal at the Lord's Last Supper. Good Friday is numbing sorrow, injustice, evil. Then there is doubt, uncertainty, and fear on Saturday.

And then Easter! Hope and promise fulfilled. Miracle and mystery abound. And life. It's all about life. And yet, even as Easter Christians, death and dying are still with us.

So I finally tackled a book I've had, a history of death and dying called *The Hour of Our Death*. The author, a French historian, sees our focus toward death moving from the community, to the individual, to others. In ancient times every death was about the community. It involved the community. The community felt it. The community responded to it, the community would even show up, bedside, to await it, to observe it. And the community joined together to mourn it, and to help the family survive it. Death was communal, and in its own way, beautiful.

Then death began to be seen as individual. It's about me. It's my life. It's my death. Grief became bigger. Fear became bigger. Judgment Day became bigger. More recently, death is more about others, the survivors, those left

behind, the family. So death becomes more remote, more antiseptic, less personal, less messy, less grim. And Probate Court is more important. The issue changes from what happens to the community, to what happens to the individual, to what happens to the family. It's an interesting book and shows that how we think about death affects everything from cemeteries to funerals to theology.

There have been big changes in my lifetime. I'm old enough to remember "home funerals," everything done right there in the living room: the casket, the wake, the funeral. When I was a pastor in New York City, our funeral procession would drive along to the cemetery, often swinging by where the person lived or went to school, and as we drove along, people on the sidewalks took off their hats, dropped to their knees, crossed themselves, said a prayer.

In my early years in ministry, whenever someone died, immediately a wreath appeared on the front door of the home, so when folks came home from school and work, they knew there was a death there. The whole neighborhood rallied around the family, cooking and baking and taking up a collection, dropping by, knowing full well that the family had its hands full for a while. So everyone helped.

In my time, cremation has moved from unpopular, even sinful, to widely accepted and popular. We've moved from large mausoleums and big headstones to memorial gardens and parks with simple plaques. In my early days as a pastor, you had the wake, or calling hours, at the funeral home. Two full days, afternoon and evening, and a funeral on the third day at the funeral home. Now, most services are in a church, and many times there are no viewings, no calling hours. Nowadays, you can go online to a Web page devoted to the deceased, and you can even attend the funeral online!

There are also changes theological, spiritually, changes in what we believe. Walk through the old section of any cemetery and look at the statues, the headstones, the monuments. Over and over again you will see "Rest in Peace," "R.I.P.," and even the Latin version, "Requiem Aeternam," Eternal Rest.

That was the general tone of Christian burial. You die. You rest in peace, waiting, waiting till Judgment Day. You know the old songs, "In the great gettin'-up mornin', fare thee well, fare thee well," "When the Saints go marching in, Lord, I want to be in that number, when the Saints go marching in."

You die, you're buried, you rest in peace until Judgment Day. The whole world is resurrected. The Book of Life is opened. And God judges you into heaven or not. Now the trend is toward believing that we die and immediately we go to be with God. We say to one another, "So-and-so has gone to be with the Lord," or, "God needed another angel," or, "Don't be sad, Grandma is in heaven."

You might wonder how Christian people could be so divided on such an important matter as what happens when we die. Well, first, no one has ever come back from death to tell us. Second, the Bible is hard to pin down on this. You want a verse for instant resurrection? I've got one. You want a verse for "Rest in Peace"? I've got one.

To the deceased it doesn't matter. You die. Next thing you know, you're in heaven. It doesn't matter if there are 3,000 years in between. The Bible says, "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, the dead shall be raised." That's what it seems like. The thing is, we want particulars. We want to know what we can't know, so we imagine the particulars. We get resurrected. We walk through the Pearly Gates. We sit on a cloud. We wear a white robe. We play the harp. But there aren't that many particulars in the Bible. What I do have is the Nature of God. The Bible, just like the 23rd Psalm, shows us what God is like. That's the most telling part of the Bible for me. In life, if you tell me what somebody is like, I'll tell you what that person is likely to do.

I got a hilarious e-mail this week. It's an exchange of outdoor bulletin boards, battling billboards, between a Catholic church and a Presbyterian church about whether dogs go to heaven. The Bible doesn't tell us, but I know the answer. The Bible says, "God is love and God loves us." The rest is easy to figure out. If God is loving, and God loves you, and you love your dog, then of course your dog is in heaven! So forget stressing over the particulars. All we need to know is God. The rest follows.

What our faith gives us is confidence, calmness, a peace. There is a place. With people. Where we will know ... and be known. It is a place beyond imagination, better than the best, priceless beyond compare, worth every effort. That's the beauty of the 23rd Psalm. No complicated theology. No heavy doctrine. Just a beautiful image of a good and loving God, who treasures us so much that no matter what we go through, we are assured victory in the end.

I came across these two great quotes about special powers of the 23rd Psalm. One said, "Through the centuries this Psalm has won for itself a supreme place in the religious literature of the world. All who read it find in

the quiet beauty of its thoughts spiritual insight that satisfies and possesses their souls. It breathes confidence and trust in the Lord. It begins and ends only with the never-failing goodness of the Lord."

"What makes it so beloved? It is but a simple little lyric, artless and sunny. Written by some Godly Hebrew Robert Burns in a restful moment. Yet this is no sundial recording, only sunny hours. It faces faithfully the dark defile and the lurking foes, and yet it honestly and thankfully remembers life's delights. In short, it sees life steadily and sees it whole, and leaves no doubt as to the master force governing all." That master force, that Godly good we know as the Good Shepherd, who leads us to green pastures, still waters, a restored soul, a banquet, and immortality.

Even in the dying, God's sure love is greater than life's greatest hurt, so I close by returning one last time to an obituary page of *The New York Times* for a 52-year-old Harvard law professor, William Stuntz, a brilliant mind, a staunch advocate for merciful justice, and a strong, devoted, Bible-believing evangelical Christian. In the midst of pain, with death on the near horizon, Mr. Stuntz said he found hope in the Bible, surprisingly in the Book of Job, a book all about loss and suffering and sorrow. Job confronts death starkly, bluntly. He says, "Man born of woman has a life of few days, full of trouble. He springs up like a flower and then withers away like a fleeting shadow. Man dies and is laid low." (Job 14:1, 2, 7, 10)

Remember, Job is in man who lost everything — family, friends, wealth, and now his own health. And yet, even in that Valley of the Shadow of Death, Job does not stay in despair. Job goes on to tell God (and this is what inspired Williams Stuntz): "I will await my renewal to come. You will call and I will answer. For I know that you long for the creature your hands have made. You will count my steps, but you will not keep track of my sin." (Job 14:14-16)

That, the Harvard professor said, that is my hope, that God longs, yearns, treasures this very creature God's hands have made. Mr. Stuntz wrote at the end of his life, "The idea that God longs for the likes of me is so unbelievably sweet." (Martin, Douglas. "W. J. Stuntz, Who Stimulated Legal Minds, Dies at 52." *The New York Times* 20 Mar. 2011. Print.)

Dear friends, sorrow is real. Dying and death are achingly real. But the knowledge that you are yearned for on the other side, that you are awakened, that your arrival, that you, *you* are God's Great Expectation; that you are longed for by love itself.

That is truly, unbelievably sweet. Amen