

"Imagine a Good Death"

Genesis 50:15-26

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June 27, 2010

Last in a series *"When Life Happens"*

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept.

His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.

But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

Joseph stayed in Egypt, along with all his father's family. He lived a hundred and ten years and saw the third generation of Ephraim's children. Also the children of Makir son of Manasseh were placed at birth on Joseph's knees.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." And Joseph made the sons of Israel swear an oath and said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place."

So Joseph died at the age of a hundred and ten. And after they embalmed him, he was placed in a coffin in Egypt.

Steve Blakey was 58 years old. He was relieved when his doctors confirmed that he was dying of throat cancer. But his wife was furious, believing they had killed his hope.

A longtime investigator with the Dallas Police Force, Mr. Blakey battled his condition unflinchingly for eleven years. He endured excruciating pain, telling colleagues nothing even as his vertebrae crumbled from repeated radiation treatments.

While hospitalized at Presbyterian Hospital last year, Mr. Blakey began having frank discussions with his doctor.

"She didn't speak in gray. When I specifically asked her, 'How long do I have to live?' she said, 'Two weeks to two or three months.' I asked her how the disease will kill me. She said, 'Probably by infection that your body can't fight.'"

That news gave him comfort and purpose. "I wanted to really get my mind right with the idea of dying."

A clear prognosis freed him to accomplish final goals: tell his family about his estate, hold his newborn granddaughter and speak from the heart to those he loved.

Mr. Blakey had no regrets. He had done so many things in life he'd wanted to do: walked the streets in Paris, loved his family, and had work that really made a difference.

Mr. Blakey died a good death.¹

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In Charlotte Bronte's classic novel *Jane Eyre*, Jane accompanies her young friend Helen as Helen approaches death. The dialogue Bronte provides is very theologically astute. Bronte does not make up things that are not in the Bible.

"But where are you going to, Helen? Can you see? Do you know?"

"I believe; I have faith: I am going to God."

"Where is God? What is God?"

"My Maker and yours, who will never destroy what He created. I rely implicitly on His power, and confide wholly in His goodness: I count the hours till that eventful one arrives which shall restore me to Him, reveal Him to me."

¹ Taken from "At the Edge of Death" series in DMN, December 2008

"You are sure, then, Helen, that there is such a place as heaven, and that our souls can get to it when we die?"

"I am sure there is a future state; I believe God is good; I can resign my immortal part to Him without any misgiving. God is my father; God is my friend: I love Him; I believe He loves me."

"And shall I see you again, Helen, when I die?"

"You will come to the same region of happiness: be received by the same mighty, universal Parent, no doubt, dear Jane."

Again I questioned, but this time only in thought. "Where is that region? Does it exist?" And I clasped my arms closer round Helen; she seemed dearer to me than ever; I felt as if I could not let her go; I lay with my face hidden on her neck.

Young Helen died a good death.

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Julia was nearly ninety when cancer entered her life. She had always been so lively and active her children and grandchildren acted as though she'd always be here. That she'd always be around to make her exquisite cherry pies for the annual family get-togethers out at the Ranch. Always be around to send a card or note on a special occasion. Always be available to lend her wisdom to the numerous progeny she and her husband had spawned.

Julia decided right away she didn't want to undergo chemotherapy.

"I'll be darned if I am going to feel nauseated the last few months of my life, just to give myself an extra week or two!"

The doctors told her what to expect, and she made her plans. She gathered her brood. One by one gave them things she had cherished, and more importantly, the stories that went with them. The brooch her husband had given her when they were engaged. The painting they'd bought the first time they went to Rome. The special certificate she'd received for her work with the homeless.

"I don't want to see any long faces! I am going to my reward! I want you all celebrating, not keening, when I am gone!"

There was one son and his family who didn't come that day. They were afraid. There had been a falling out years ago. Edward who had kept his distance. He knew he'd done wrong by his mother. He really wanted to see her and make amends, but he was afraid she might not forgive him. He needn't have worried.

Julia missed him that day, but she wasn't going to miss him for long. In no uncertain terms, she demanded he come, and that he bring along his whole family.

Edward wept to see his mother so frail and yet so luminous.

"Edward John Burbank, I am about to die. You don't need to be afraid of what you did. It's past. It's over. And you know, there were a few good things that came of it, even though it was painful for us, Edward. You would never have met Sylvia if some of that hadn't happened. God used it for good."

Julia died a good death.

Imagine your own good death. What does it look like? Feel like?

A good death is the result of a good life, no matter how long, no matter how short. We want death to be peaceful and calm, with a minimum of pain and suffering. Most of us wish for death at a ripe old age, which by definition is quite a bit older than we are right now (no matter how many birthday candles flame up our cakes these days).

For several weeks now we have not only considered the difficulties of what we encounter *When Life Happens*, on Tuesday evenings some of us have been exploring questions about dealing with the end of life, led by hospice social worker, our own Jane Young. It has been a wonderfully informative and deeply moving and spiritual time.

Some of the desires which have been mentioned during this Tuesday night series:

We want our dying to not burden the living.

Though most Americans do not, we want to die at home.

We want to be at peace with our God and our loved ones.

We want to be as pain free as possible.

We want to die with clarity and dignity, and we do not wish to linger in a vegetative state.

All of these contribute to a good death. To some extent, one can prepare for this kind of death. There are advance medical directives, advanced funeral planning, communicating clearly with your family, and making plans for financial and medical needs, making a will. There is Hospice, which is a wonderful resource for everyone approaching death.

In order to prepare for a good death, it is essential to talk about it. The conspiracy of silence that often surrounds death makes it difficult to have a good death. It is necessary to talk about it.

Death is the most everyday of everyday events. Despite medical advances, the death rate is still 100%. And yet we hesitate to speak of it. When we are dying, we hesitate. When we are with the dying, we hesitate. Silence reigns and casts a deep pallor over death. Silence is the cause of much suffering and isolation for the dying.

There are practical plans we can make, but there is more to a good death than plans. A good death is truly the result of a good life. Our scripture today is the very end of the long book of Genesis. There is a lot which happens before this account of Joseph's death. Joseph was faithful to what his father had wanted when he died. He was faithful to what God had instructed throughout his entire life. Faithfulness was his character.

Because he had been faithful, he was able to leave this life without fear. Because he was faithful, he was able to comfort others even as he himself prepared for death. Joseph let his loved ones know what he wanted after he died, and he assured them of God's presence even as he faced his own death.

A good death reflects upon the character of the one who has lived well. By living well we do not mean a life of enjoyment or high living. But rather a life dedicated to a higher purpose, a life in which God's will was revealed and responded to. A life in which one was faithful to one's commitments. A life which took joy in one's circumstances, no matter how limited. A life of good character and obedience.

Such character builds perspective and prepares one for a good death, no matter what, no matter when. Such a life, and such a death, allows the dying and the bereaved to be changed by death. We stay with death. We are silent. We allow time for death and grief to unfold.

Such a death is a testimonial to those who remain, to those left behind. Such a death allows one to say, when one has passed from this life into the next:

"You know, Jesus, as we were saying. . . "

May we all live in such a way today that we can hope for a good death tomorrow.