



Texts in Context

Funerals before the Funeral Service

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We call this feature “Texts in Context,” and our attention to context requires that we address the deathliness of our existence long before any specific funeral. In short, we need “funerals” long before the funeral service.

My own description of the context of funerals is informed by observing at a distance through reading recent publications and by personal experience through years of attending funerals of friends and acquaintances. In the months between agreeing to write this essay and its completion, my mother died. Thus, there is also an inescapable personal dimension hovering over the words written here.

CONTEXTUAL CONCERNS

It is commonplace to observe that funerals have shifted to celebrations of life.¹ “Commonplace” but by no means universal—many pastors with whom I have spoken in recent months argue against this assertion. Undoubtedly there are significant variations from one region of the country to another as well as within regions. Nevertheless, if eulogies have not become central, the starkness of death

¹My characterization of the context for funerals has been shaped by the following recent books: Thomas G. Long and Thomas Lynch, *The Good Funeral: Death, Grief, and the Community of Care* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013); Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009); Fred Craddock, Dale Goldsmith, and Joy V. Goldsmith, *Speaking of Dying: Recovering the Church's Voice in the Face of Death* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2012); and John Swinton and Richard Payne, eds., *Living Well and Dying Faithfully: Christian Practices for the End-of-Life Care* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009). Each of these has ample bibliographic references to expand the observations and the discussion these books prompt.

Addressing the reality of death at the time of the funeral is too late. The pastor's judicious use of biblical laments prior to any specific funeral will help prepare people to recognize the full terror of death so resurrection can be heard with the surprise it deserves.

has been decentralized and even pastors who have not turned to celebrations of life recognize the forces pushing in that direction. Forty years after its publication, the title *The Denial of Death* still reverberates in our consciousness as an implicit indictment.²

The increased number of cremations and thus the absence of a body at funerals has been noted as one indication that the focus of the ceremony has shifted. Even where there is an open casket, attention is often drawn to a photo collage with pictures of canoe trips, golf outings, family reunions, and the like—all the pictures pointing to joy and accomplishment. One rarely, if ever, sees pictures of debilitating experiences such as gathering at the gravesite of a child of the deceased, lying in a hospital bed with IVs attached, or standing before the burned-out ruins of the family home. The deathly experiences of life that preceded death are not acknowledged. There have been many “deaths” prior to the funeral, and tending to the prior “deaths” changes the character of what we are prepared for before any funeral service commences.

In specifically Christian circles the shift may not be as obvious as in the larger culture, but it is nevertheless present. While accent on the celebration of life can be seen as a robust thanksgiving to God for the blessing the deceased has been in the lives of those gathered at the funeral, it can also serve to mute the disruption and loss that has occurred. If the promise of the resurrection is coupled primarily with a celebration of life, then the accent is on continuity and it is easy from there to slip into the immortality of the soul. The soul did not die and, thus, images of fishing, skiing, golfing, knitting, cooking, and visiting are transferred to heaven—now done with previously departed friends and family members (and perhaps with Jesus as well).

The price we pay for this is that the pain of the loss of life is papered over: both the pain of dying that the deceased endured and the pain of no longer having the deceased in our lives. When death is not treated as the loss that it is, then the promise of the resurrection is no longer an outrageous claim. Trivializing the death trivializes the resurrection promise. There should be a defiant tone in the promise of the resurrection—it defies all logic. It defies the finiteness of the stiff, dead body. The resurrection is best viewed from the foot of the cross where there can be no denial of death.³

The paragraphs immediately above grow out of reading and personal observation that can remain a bit emotionally distant. As I mentioned earlier, my mother died during the time I worked on this essay. A distant, observing posture is broken in that context. Observation shifts to full participation. The funeral was

²Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1973).

³Joseph Sittler’s words from 1949 drive home the point: “The cross is the symbol because the whacks of life take that shape. Our lives are full of abandonments, infidelities, tragedies. The affirmation is always crossed by a negation. The vitalities of life move toward death. And unless you have a crucified God, you don’t have a big enough God.” *Grace Notes and Other Fragments* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 118. For a recent, more extended, articulation of this view, see John Swinton, “‘Why Me, Lord?’: Practicing Lament at the Foot of the Cross,” in *Living Well and Dying Faithfully: Christian Practices for the End-of-Life Care*, 107–138.

“traditional,” with the visitation at the church prior to the funeral service. Classic hymns and biblical texts were sung and read, all according to the desires my mother had expressed long before her death. She died trusting the promise of God in Christ that nothing, not even her death, could separate her from God’s love in Christ. In some form—to be determined by God alone—God would maintain a relationship to her beyond death. This was her witness in life and this is what she wanted expressed in her funeral service.

Yet for all this, there were clear expressions that resonated with the wider culture’s denial of death. Our cultural awkwardness around death found expression in the frequent comment that she “looked good.” Or, that she did not suffer—even her doctor said that. (How would any of us know what her torment may or may not have been?) Or, that ninety-three years was a good length of days. All of these expressions came from people making an effort to connect compassionately, and their compassion was received with gratitude by my family.

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Yet no one spoke of the gap between the vitality of life we had known in her hard work on a small family dairy farm, or in maintaining large strawberry and raspberry patches, and the later diminished figure sitting hunched over in a wheelchair, unable to navigate the world either physically or cognitively. There was no place for articulating all the deaths of capacity that preceded the cessation of a pulse. There was no mention of disappointments, or tragic sorrows, or betrayals, or burdens. While her cries did not reach the depth of Israel’s cries in slavery (Exod 2:23–25) or in exile (Lam 5:20–22), she did participate in the “eager longing for the revealing of the children of God” and the whole creation’s “groaning in labor pains” (Rom 8:20, 22). The family privately created conversations that did give expression to the losses finalized in death, but there was a dearth of such conversations in public spaces.

No one connected to my mother’s funeral is to be scolded. Nor am I arguing for a ranting against the darkness or for making funerals macabre. Nor am I suggesting a different liturgy or the introduction of wailing rituals from other traditions in global Christianity. There is no virtue in programmed dolefulness. Christians ought not to abandon the articulation of joy experienced in God’s promise to create new life out of and in the midst of death. Christ is risen. If we are not to be raised from the dead, then Christ’s resurrection will be incomplete and pointless. But should this not mean that Christians speak freely and deeply about the loss that occurs in death? There is no need to be euphemistic about death. Our speech in the context of death should not be quickly applying a Christian smiley face to the darkness that is being experienced.

The shifts pointed out by observers such as those mentioned in my first footnote and echoed in muted form during my mother's funeral should be addressed long before funeral arrangements are made. Holding onto older practices and liturgies may try to form a bulwark against the shifts, but it may also be counterproductive to a Christian witness within the larger culture. In fact, traditional practices by themselves may do little more than retain the aura of the transcendent after all ongoing relationship to the transcendent has dropped out of regular practice. Thinking about our funeral habits raises questions about how we think about death, which in turn raises questions about how we think about all of life. That chain of interconnections means that, if we find deficiencies in our conduct at funerals, we need to start thinking about funerals long before the actual funeral, about death long before actuarial tables become biographical fact, and about the meaning of life, which will end with dying. The denial of death starts long before the funeral. We need to address the deathliness of our existence long before we have to attend a funeral. In the remainder of this essay, I will comment on Psalms 90 and 27 to suggest using biblical laments as a practice that helps us have funerals before the funeral.

PSALM 90: FUNERAL SPEECH BEFORE THE FUNERAL

As with the image of God as shepherd in Ps 23, we can use the image of an enduring refuge or dwelling place in Ps 90 to provide a reassurance that diverts our attention from that which unsettles our lives and participates in our cultural denial of death. Ps 90, however, quickly undercuts any attempted diversion; in fact, it acutely challenges it. Rather than being a quieting image, the endurance of God magnifies our lack of durability. We are but dust easily blown away compared to God who is more enduring than the mountains. We are as durable as a dream or foliage under the desert sun.

Each of us could contribute images and narratives that point to our finitude. Perhaps reading the obituary page week after week at the beginning of a Bible Study could bring the issue into open conversation in our communities. The first obituary page in the Bible is Gen 5; "he died" is a refrain throughout the chapter. Methuselah may top out at 969-years-old, but in the view of Ps 90 even that is like yesterday to God. No amount of good eating, proper exercise, or botox will remove the words "he died" and returned to dust. Given our public culture's deep denial of death, the funeral is probably not the place for a frontal assault with the words of Ps 90, but, at the same time, these themes will be in the air. We are complicit in the denials if we do not broach them. The assault will occur even without our direct articulation.⁴ Finitude will be terrifyingly present in the hearts and minds of many at

⁴Forty years ago, Martin E. Marty called this assaulting anxiety one that sneaks up on you in the middle of the night. It asserts, "You are finite. The couple of cubic feet you now occupy will one day not be occupied by you, and the atoms that now constitute you will have been dispersed. The time of your being will have moved on. . . . [H]aving awakened at 3 A.M., you . . . know in your bones that you matter little in the eternal mess. 'I am no big deal, and before long I will be no deal at all.' You purge the thought, but it comes back." *You Are Promise* (Niles, IL: Argus Communications, 1973) 58–60.

the funeral. We should neither attempt to scold the terror away nor seek to quickly move on in the so-called grief process.

Psalms 90, in fact, compounds the disquiet by moving to the topic of our iniquities and our sins. That introduces an additional topic that our culture seeks to evade. "Iniquities" is a word infrequently spoken. It seems quaint to some; to others it is just too negative. As a character in John Updike's *Witches of Eastwick* states, "We prefer to say 'unfortunate' or 'lacking' or 'misguided' or 'disadvantaged.' We prefer to think of evil as the absence of good, a momentary relenting of the sunshine, a shadow, a weakening."⁵ The psalmist's sense of the gap between self and God will not be removed by redefining sin and evil to make them merely the absence of good. The images of the Aaronic blessing now become images of discomfort. The metaphor of God's blessing face turned toward us and countenance lifted above us (Num 6: 25–26) has become a metaphor of complete exposure: "You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance" (90:8). There is no place to hide. "You have been my refuge (or dwelling place)" may be less comfortable once the exposure is noticed.

Culturally, both inside and outside of the church, there is great unwillingness to conclude: "All our days pass away under your wrath." A frequent response is to assert, "My God is not a God of wrath; my God is a God of grace." That assertion can be an attempt to escape the indicting exposure by redefining God in a more palatable way. Often it is coupled with the additional claim that God only allows evil to occur. An allowing, inactive, absent God, however, does not resolve the indicting exposure. In fact, God's absence may be the most feared prospect in the Old Testament, for the void is filled by a legion of victimizers ready to pounce. Even in a psalm as reassuring as Ps 23, the dark valley and enemies are held at bay only by the presence of the shepherding Lord. God's absence and God's wrath, in fact, overlap in the Old Testament. One need go no further away from Ps 90 than to the previous psalm to see them joined: "How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire?" (Ps 89:46).

By the time the reader of Ps 90 reaches v. 9a, both finitude and iniquity loom large and disrupt any smiley face we seek to place on life. Verses 9b–11 reiterate both themes. Life at seventy or eighty years is still a sigh; it is soon gone. Its brief duration is characterized by toil and trouble, and it is lived under God's anger and wrath. John Updike, again, captures this well when he has a character muse, "How quickly we become history, while wanting always to be news."⁶ Finitude and iniquitous hubris!

I have heard Ps 90:1–11 read in a hushed tone during funerals and then followed by a reading of v. 12 in a manner that directs the petition to me rather than

⁵John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick* (New York: Knopf, 1984) 269.

⁶John Updike, *Memories of the Ford Administration* (New York: Knopf, 1992) 366. This is an example of the work of the opening section of Ps 90 being done in contemporary fiction. Many lyrics in popular music also unmask our optimistic habits and formulations, which engage in the denial of death and its accompanying inability to candidly address the horrors of our injustices and brokenness.

to God. The “teach us” directed to God slides into a “count our days” directed to me. Thus, the “wise heart” is achieved by judiciously using my few years, be they seventy or eighty (or less).⁷ In Ps 90, however, there is no injunction directed to the reader or hearer. Instead, “teach us” is the first in a long string of pleas with imperative force directed to God: turn, have compassion, satisfy us, make us glad, manifest your work and glorious power, place your favor upon us, and prosper the work of our hands. The petitionary demand is that meaningless life/work and divine affliction be removed.

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This is no less than praying, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven!” For the psalmist and for us, much of our experience of life does not conform to what God has promised. We believe and trust that God’s will is done in heaven. Our plea is that it also occur on earth. The promise of sorrow and sighing fleeing away (Isa 35:10) and the passing of tears, death, mourning, crying, and pain (Rev 21:4) are what is demanded both in Ps 90 and in the Lord’s Prayer.

Clear-eyed honesty about the deathly dimensions of life and bold speech that claims God’s covenantal promise are at the core of biblical lamenting. Biblical laments are not a cynical, curmudgeonly attitude toward life, but it should also be stressed that they do not counter such an attitude with Pollyanna-like optimism. In contrast to both, the laments are neither uplifting principles for living nor an attitude toward living; rather, biblical laments are present-tense prayers—constantly present tense. The world is too broken and God’s passion and promises too great not to scream, “How long?” “Your kingdom come!” “Deliver us from evil.” The Lord’s Prayer takes up the boldly petitionary tone and the demanding imperatives of biblical laments like Ps 90. A lifetime of such praying prepares us for the deep sorrow of a funeral. It resists letting celebrations of life slide into sentimental denials of death. Taking up the candor and boldness of the laments means having “funerals” long before the funeral.

PSALM 27: FUNERAL PETITIONING BEFORE THE FUNERAL

Psalm 27 is a lament psalm that intensely petitions God long before a funeral. It articulates both confident faith and bold petitioning, a petitioning that does not

⁷Barbara Ehrenreich, in *Bright-sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009), relentlessly challenges the many formulas offered in our culture, including in churches, for accomplishing a good and successful life. All of them are conditioned on our action, and any failure is our failure to apply the wise principles. There are no victims because everything wrong is their own fault. Hers is a secular voice, but nevertheless it is a powerful unmasking of secular ideologies and religious theologies of triumphal glory. For an explicitly theological critique of our avoidance, see Andrew Root, *The Promise of Despair: The Way of the Cross as the Way of the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010).

quietly surrender. All the positive assertions that parallel the end of Ps 13 are at the beginning of Ps 27. Reading 27:1–6 is the equivalent of Ps 91; there is nothing to fear. God counteracts any threat that is present or on the horizon. God is the psalmist's light, salvation, stronghold, shelter, and tent shielding against adversaries, foes, and armies. There are echoes of Ps 23 where the psalmist envisions a banquet in the presences of threatening armies and a tranquility that allows for life in the house of the Lord. But—and the “but” is a major one—honesty about the present condition elicits a barrage of petitioning imperatives: Hear, be gracious, answer me, don't hide your face from me, don't turn your servant away, don't cast me off, don't forsake me, teach me your way, lead me on a level path, and don't give me up to the will of my adversaries. The opening creed-like confidence does not preclude desperate demands.

The final injunctions in Ps 27 are, unlike Ps 90, directed to the reader: “Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD.” Nothing in these closing injunctions withdraws the audacity shown in the imperatives directed to God in the midsection of the psalm. The opening statement of confidence and the closing injunctions resonate with Jesus' words: “Into your hands I commend my spirit.” The bold imperatives directed to God come from within a present-tense, lived reality that also resonates with Jesus' speech: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” One word is not purchased at the expense of the other.⁸

Inhabiting the voice of lament in the form of this bold petitioning attends to all the disruptions of life as they occur. The funeral service itself is too late. Shouting the imperatives of petitioning lamentation at a funeral would seem overdramatic and hyperbolic. They should be present long before the funeral. They should be part of our Christian speech throughout life. This side of the new heaven and new earth, our celebrations of life need to be embedded in laments about the brokenness of life and narratives of our deaths before our death. We need funerals before the funeral and the biblical laments provide the language for those funerals. ⊕

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⁸Richard John Neuhaus's *Death on a Friday Afternoon: Meditations on the Last Words of Jesus from the Cross* (New York: Basic Books, 2000) is an extended and compelling reflection on the interplay of Jesus' last words. In a less meditative and more academic style, Alan E. Lewis has pressed the need for dwelling on Holy Saturday, not simply for the day between Good Friday and Easter but throughout our creaturely existence. It is a posture of hope coupled with honesty about where we are and entirely consistent with biblical laments. *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).