

**November 1, 2015**

**TEXT: Isaiah 25:6–9**

**TITLE: Lifting the Shroud**

The four verses from Isaiah I just read are incredibly upbeat and encouraging. One commentator called them “prodigious in joy,” which is amazing because the central theme of the verses is death. We’re told God will destroy the shroud that is cast over all people, the sheet that is spread over nations. These textile references (shroud, sheet) are directly linked to death and grieving. It’s interesting to me that the fabric laid over coffins is called a funeral pall, while in the English language we speak of someone “casting a pall over things” which means that someone makes things gloomy or depressed. Isaiah’s words speak of the precise opposite action. God doesn’t cast a pall, but instead lifts the shroud, casts away the sheet of gloom that covers the nations; God swallows up death itself. That’s why this Old Testament passage is sometimes read on Easter morning. It points to the joyful good news of Christ’s resurrection and the end of death’s power over humanity.

Death is one of those topics that everyone is fixated on but no one wants to talk about. Mitch Albom, in his classic Tuesdays with Morrie wrote, “Everyone knows they’re going to die, but nobody believes it (p. 81). Lance Morrow, a former essayist for TIME magazine told the old joke that “death is nature’s way of telling you to slow down” (Heart, p. 512). We rationally tell ourselves that death is a natural and inevitable byproduct of life. We are born and we will die; the continuation of life in general requires the particular death of each and every creature. We pass away so other forms of life may emerge and flourish. Yet for all our cool-headed, scientific logic about death, we still tend to divide life from death, living from dying, as if they happen to two different sets of people. We know we’re going to die but we don’t really believe it.

So when we really focus on death, the reality of our death, it feels as if this topic casts a pall over us—a sheet or shroud is spread over us. Perhaps the issue is less about death itself and more about wondering how to live when our lives are defined by death—how to live knowing there is a limit, a terminus against which we constantly strive. Perhaps the issue is more about grief, and that our deepest human desire is not to let sorrow and mourning be the dominant, ultimate emotions shaping our lives.

If all that is true, then the first step in lifting the shroud is to talk honestly about grief. People struggle with what to say to a person who’s grieving. Sometimes we resort to saying seriously flawed remarks. “God must have needed another angel in heaven when God took your loved one.” Really? Heaven has a shortage of angels and my loss is less important than some sort of heavenly quota? “God won’t give you more than you can handle.” OK—that phrase is not in the bible. There is a passage Paul wrote in I Corinthians that says “God will not let you be tempted beyond your strength” but temptations are far different from burdens.

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians about being so afflicted that he felt unbearably crushed and despaired of life itself (2 Cor 1:8). Burdens can and will be overwhelming at times. Scripture reminds us that God is with us when we are at our wit's end and are feeling totally overwhelmed; but that other phrase about God not giving you more than you can handle is simply a pious version of "suck it up, buttercup."

A third unfortunate phrase people say after the death of a loved one is to tell someone "In time you'll get over your grief." Look, grief is not something we "get over." Grief is not something we endure or medicate away or wait until it passes. It is a person-shaped hole in our hearts. It is part of our self-definition, our lifelong collection of personal memories. The poet Meghan O'Rourke wrote: "We live in a culture so preoccupied with happiness...that we forget grief is not something merely to get over, something over which we achieve closure. It is a human undertaking, a slow, sticky process of allowing our love [for another] to take a [different], more remote, shape." She reminds us that grieving is a sign of love; and love will always have a place of privilege in our lives and in our faith. (NYT Book Review, 4/26/15, p. 16)

If the first step in lifting the shroud is to accept grief as a companion while we live, the second step is to invite hope to be by our side as well. Hope sits beside us and reminds us that life will not be defined by loss and mourning. Life will not be absolutely limited by death and the grave. And for that message to sink in, Hope has to invite in another faith companion—Grace.

There is a two-sided coin we churchgoers commonly carry around in our pockets, which we clutch onto when times are hard and a pall falls over us. One side tells us that we are saved by what we believe—that if we just believed harder, more steadfastly or deeper, then we will be saved and bad things won't happen to us. That's the conservative heresy—that you are saved by how well you personally believe in God. The other side of the coin tells us that we need to do more to be people of goodness committed to changing the world. Don't buy that \$4 slice of pizza if that money could purchase an anti-malaria bed net to save children in Africa. Don't buy a concert ticket or eat at a fancy restaurant when an equivalent donation can feed 43 starving people or rescue 11 girls from sex trafficking in Asia.<sup>1</sup> That's the liberal heresy—that you are saved by your good works; that your idealism and sincere efforts get you into heaven.

Hope quietly takes this two-sided heretical coin out of our hands. We are not saved by works—either our works of belief or our works of good deeds. We are saved by grace—by a God who comes to us and embraces us with our incomplete faith and imperfect actions and loves us in spite of everything. We may argue that this is not fair, not rational—to which a heavenly voice chuckles and says, "Of course not." And then we hear the well-worn scripture verse: *For God so loved the world that God sent the only begotten Son into the world, not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him* (John 3:16-17)

In place of the coin, this false talisman we rub and fuss over, Grace places in our hand bread to eat and a cup to drink. We are invited to a biblical feast of rich food and well-aged wines—things we have longed to eat; and more importantly, things that will be shared with all people.

As Love, Hope and Grace escort us to take our place at this table, whatever disgrace we've carried in life falls away from us. It is left behind like a heavy burden to which we are no longer bound or obligated. And as we move forward, our tear-streaked faces are wiped dry. For on that day the words of Isaiah are proclaimed all around us: *Behold, this is our God. This is our Lord. This is the risen Christ, the time of resurrection, the promised healing, the day of reunion. We have waited for this. As Easter people, let us be glad and rejoice in God's salvation.*

In that moment, we recognize that, perhaps for the first time, we can see so much farther than we've ever seen before. Why is that? Because the shroud has been lifted. The white sheet draped over us has been pulled away and removed. Death has been swallowed up in victory.

Good news of great joy. The word of the Lord—thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. "They Give and Give", book review by Hector Tobar of *Strangers Drowning: Grappling with Impossible Idealism* by Larissa MacFarquhar; NYT Book Review, October 11, 2015, p. 13.