

**God Will Wipe Away Every Tear**  
**A Sermon by Louise Westfall**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
**6 November 2005**  
**Text: Revelation 21:1-6**

*Life changes fast. Life changes in the instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.* So begins writer Joan Didion's pitch-perfect examination of grief and grieving as she experienced it following the sudden death of her husband and the life-threatening illness of their only child. The title of her book is telling: *The Year of Magical Thinking*—a reference to the kind of tricks your mind and emotions play to help you cope. Grief, she writes, turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it.

Before then, we cannot imagine the unending absence that follows, the void, the very opposite of meaning, the relentless succession of moments during which we will confront the experience of meaninglessness itself.

*(Didion, The Year of Magical Thinking, pp. 188-*

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I could not put this book down because, like you, I know what she's talking about. Death is the enemy we successfully avoid until we can't, until we sit down to dinner and life as we know it ends. Later in this service, we will read the names of Fairmount members who have died in the past year, and that is good, because each is worthy of remembrance and gratitude. Yet there will be tears because the calculus of loss is without measure. The four memorial services that occurred here this week are sharp reminders of fresh grief, of families who are only at the beginning of that long loneliness. Whenever we commemorate the lives and witness of the recently departed, we also stir memories of others we have loved who have died. We remember, and we grieve.

We grieve, wrote the apostle Paul, but "we do not grieve as those who have no hope." Christian faith has never denied the pain of loss or turned a blind eye from the tsunami of sorrow that threatens our carefully-constructed lives. Grief is real, grief is normal as the consequence of losing those whom we love. Psychologists speak of "grief *work*"—and so it is. We grieve but we do not grieve as those who have no hope. Instead, amid scenes of desolation and devastation, Christian faith offers another picture, another scenario that is as true as death is true. We find many expressions of this picture throughout Scripture, but perhaps none as compelling as the one in the morning text. The Revelation to John was written to the Church late in the first century, in a time of extraordinary

persecution. Writing in code, the author encourages the believers to stand firm in their faith because against all odds, God in Christ has defeated evil. Evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, even death has been overcome in the triumph song of life. A reading from the Revelation to John, in the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter, found on p. 259 of the pew/chapel Bibles, beginning at the first verse. Listen for God's Word to the Church and to you this day: [REVELATION 21:1-6]

*Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray Thee Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray Thee Lord my soul to take.*

I learned that prayer as a child, followed by a litany of "God bless" Daddy and Mother and my four siblings and our dog Buff and anyone else I could think of—in those days long prayers were an antidote to "lights out." It was part of a bedtime ritual that included drinks of water, parental kisses, and having the covers "tucked in" around you. I don't remember being alarmed by it as a child, but somewhere between "psych 101" and T. Berry Brazelton, I—and many of my contemporaries—concluded that such a prayer was bound to scar a child with its association between sleeping and death. I've since heard another version of it that omits the reference to death, but my son never learned "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep." I guess there's no particular harm in that, but I wonder if it is emblematic of our adult ambivalence about death, its place in human life, and its spiritual meaning.

Arguably the greatest theologian of the twentieth century, Reinhold Niebuhr described this ambivalence using the metaphor of a sailor who climbs the mast of his ship and looks out on limitless vistas. The view is grand and inspiring. But then, from the mast, he looks down and sees the sea roaring beneath his tiny ship. Just below us is finitude. We know that no matter how high we climb, or how far our vision, we will die. Human life is both rich with possibility and bounded by the certainty of death.

How can we grieve, but not as those without hope? And how can we live joyfully, trustingly, triumphantly without denying that someday our lives—and the lives of our beloved-- will end?

For starters, let's acknowledge there are no easy answers to those questions, and that in the questions themselves we begin to find insight. Cutting off the cries and questions of the grieving heart both dishonors the grief and short-circuits the grieving process. Better to sit with the griever in silence. Better to take a chicken casserole or lemon pie to their home. Better to remember to call in six months or a year or two years. There is a story from the Sufi tradition about a man who cried, "Allah!

Allah!" until his lips became sweet with the sound. A skeptic who heard him said, "Well, I have heard you calling out, but where is the answer to your prayer? Have you ever gotten a response?" The man had no answer to that. Sadly, he abandoned his prayers and went to sleep. In his dreams he saw the prophet, walking toward him. "Why did you stop praising?" the prophet asked. "Because I never heard anything back," the man said. "This longing you voice *is* the return message," the wise man told him. "The grief you cry out from draws you toward union. Your pure sadness that wants help is the secret cup." [quoted in Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God Is Silent*, pp. 78-9]

We grieve and find that it opens a space to receive what alone will assuage it. We come into the presence of transcendent grief, the crucified One who cried out on his cross for an answer and received none. Yet that experience of divine abandonment became the way through which the finality of the death was destroyed. The grave, the columbarium niche, does not have the last word. Just as God raised Jesus from the dead, we shall be raised as well. Faith holds our hand through grief and invites us to see more. To dip our cup into the spring of life and taste that day when God will wipe every tear from our eyes. The loss that seems unbearable today will be restored, made new and whole in the new earth that is coming.

It's a compelling vision, but as one of you asked me this week, what hope does it provide a grieving widow, parents who ache with the loss of their child every day, the one whose heart followed his dead friend's into the grave? Perhaps only this: you can see through tears what you cannot see otherwise. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted by a glimpse of God's new day, when every tear will be wiped from their eyes and death will be no more. The grieving become our teachers, for they show us two true things: first, that hope is not located in a heaven far, far away. It is *this* world that God gave everything to redeem. God's home is with people, the living and those who have died. When we grieve, we draw closer to the God who grieves over the death that is in the world and is working even now to overcome it. Second, they show us that in the hope of resurrection, we are free to do more with our lives than merely strive to protect them. We can give them. We are called to love the world, to make peace, to do justice, to love our neighbor as we love ourselves [*"Teaching Moments"* article by John Buchanan, editor, *The Christian Century*, September 20, 2005]. We can give the very best of who we are without fear because Christ has put an end to the reign of death. We are free to live, really live, each day, with purpose and thanksgiving. We grieve and we get busy, preparing for that new earth.

Today we celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, recalling that it is also a sign of our "communion" with God and with one another, and with all the saints, living and departed. What better way to remember the dead than here in this meal where Christ's death is memorialized. *Do this in remembrance of me.* Do this in remembrance of fathers and mothers and husbands and wives and sons and daughters and friends and beloved ones. Do this in remembrance that Christ's death made a way for death itself to die. But do this most of all in remembrance that God is with us, and with our dead, and that keeps us together, until we meet again on that day when death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

Life changes. Life changes in the instant. Friends, sit down to this dinner and let life begin.

GLORY BE TO THE FATHER AND TO THE SON AND TO THE HOLY SPIRIT.  
AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING, IS NOW AND EVER SHALL BE, WORLD  
WITHOUT END. AMEN.

**Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor**