

# ***Embracing Death***

John 18.1-11 and 19.28-30  
Sermon by Dan Schrock  
August 17, 2008

*<sup>18:1</sup> After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. <sup>2</sup>Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. <sup>3</sup>So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. <sup>4</sup>Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, "Whom are you looking for?" <sup>5</sup>They answered, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus replied, "I am he." Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. <sup>6</sup>When Jesus said to them, "I am he," they stepped back and fell to the ground. <sup>7</sup>Again he asked them, "Whom are you looking for?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." <sup>8</sup>Jesus answered, "I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go." <sup>9</sup>This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken, "I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me." <sup>10</sup>Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus. <sup>11</sup>Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?"*

*<sup>19:28</sup> After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty." <sup>29</sup>A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. <sup>30</sup>When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (NRSV)*

When my mother died at the Elkhart General Hospital in 1992, her body was moved to a local funeral home. There the mortician worked to prepare her body for the viewing and the funeral. I don't know everything that morticians do to a body, but I imagine they wash it, if necessary, and inject some type of preservative that will fend off biological decay. Then they dress the body in clothes selected by the family.

When Dad and I went to the funeral home to make arrangements, the funeral director asked us for a photograph of Mom. We should have been suspicious right away, but being meek Mennonites, we found a photo of Mom taken some years before her death and handed it over to the mortician.

The next day we went back to see the mortician's handiwork before the public viewing began. When the funeral director opened the lid of the casket, my father gasped at what he saw. In the final months of Mom's dying, Dad had gotten used to seeing a person severely wasted by cancer. In the final months, she had lost perhaps a third of her normal body weight and her skin had become a different color.

But the face we saw in the casket was the not the face my father had been accustomed to seeing in the last three months. Instead it was an imitation—and a very poor imitation at that—of the face in that old photograph. The mortician had injected some sort of substance into her face to fill it out and make it look “normal.” As nearly as I could tell, he had shot this substance into the skin around her eyes, into her cheeks, and around her mouth and chin. In addition, he had tried to restore her “natural” skin color by plastering her face in heavy makeup, which was something my mother never wore. In short, the mortician had tried to erase the marks of dying from my mother’s face, and in so doing, to erase from our memories the way she actually looked in her final months. In defense of the mortician, he simply did what most families in North America expect funeral homes to do: help them avoid the realities of dying and death.

We North Americans are well-practiced in the art of avoiding death. While I was working on this sermon, I found a website called [lifeintheusa.com](http://lifeintheusa.com), apparently written for people from other countries who are planning to visit the United States and need some orientation to our culture. This website has a short article on the tendency of Americans to evade the reality of death. The article says:

Americans do not like to talk directly about death. In America, people don't die; they “pass away,” “expire” or “kick the bucket.” Dead people are “the departed,” or “loved ones.” They are “laid to rest” rather than buried. People about to die are “terminally ill.” Perhaps Americans have trouble talking about death because it is often so remote. People no longer die at home, but in nursing homes or hospitals.<sup>1</sup>

From what I’ve seen, some Christians also try to avoid death. On several occasions, I’ve watched as followers of Jesus frantically grasp for medical interventions to keep death at bay—interventions that in the circumstances seem extreme. I’ve witnessed followers of Jesus studiously avoid talking about the death that everyone in the room knows is just days away.

Given the various ways we followers of Jesus try to avoid death, it might shock us to discover that in the gospel of John, Jesus avidly pursues his own death. Through the arrest, trial, and crucifixion, Jesus wants to die. Let me say more about that in five points.

First, in the gospel of John Jesus does nothing at all to avoid dying. This is very different than the stories of Jesus in the other three gospels. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus goes to Gethsemane and pleads with God to let this cup pass from him (Matt 26:39, Mk 14:35-36). In Luke, Jesus goes to the Mount of Olives and prays the same prayer, this time, according to some of the ancient manuscripts, pleading to God with such fervor that he sweated blood (22:39-44). In all three of those gospels, Jesus is reluctant to die. He accepts his coming crucifixion, true, yet he'd rather not do it. But in John there is no such prayer: Jesus never pleads with God for an escape from death.

Second, when the temple police and Roman soldiers<sup>2</sup> arrive in the garden to arrest Jesus, he seizes the initiative. Before the soldiers can do anything with their “lanterns and torches and weapons,” Jesus steps forward toward them and asks whom they are looking for. When they say they're looking for Jesus of Nazareth, he calmly says, “I am” he,<sup>3</sup> and then a most curious thing happens which is definitely not in any of the other gospels: the police and the soldiers all fall down to the ground in front of Jesus in what amounts to an act of prostration or worship.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the ancient world, and also in the Bible, people who fall down in front of someone else are communicating their respect for the person standing in front of them (Ezek 1:28, Dan 10:9, Acts 9:3-4, Rev 1:17). Sometimes they are essentially worshipping that person. Furthermore, here in the arrest scene Jesus asks the soldiers—almost orders them—to let his disciples go free (18:3-8). Finally, when Peter hauls out a sword and reverts to violent self-defense, Jesus commands him to shove that sword back into its sheath (18:11). Therefore throughout the arrest, Jesus acts with confidence. He takes the initiative. He calls forth respect. And most important of all, he explicitly rejects other people's efforts to preserve or prolong his life.

Third, Jesus speaks boldly to Annas, who had formerly been the high priest of the Jerusalem temple. When Jesus was arrested, Annas was probably the most respected, honorable, and high-ranking person in the Jewish world. Not only was he the father-in-law of the current high priest, Caiaphas, but the father or grandfather of six other men who also became the high priest of the temple.<sup>5</sup> Even so, Jesus displays no fear whatsoever. He refuses to bargain with this revered old man who probably has enough

influence and power to let Jesus go free. Instead, Jesus speaks so boldly to Annas, and with so little respect, that one of the policemen slaps him on the face for impudence (18:22). But Jesus doesn't care. He seems determined to go ahead and die.

Fourth, when Jesus appears before Pontus Pilate, he stands straight and tall. He informs Pilate that the mighty, fearsome Roman empire has no authority over him (18:36, 19:11). To put it crassly, Jesus essentially thumbs his nose at Pilate and at the empire that Pilate represents. Without any doubt, Pilate, the Roman governor of all Judea who was appointed by the emperor himself, has the power to free Jesus. He can save Jesus' life, if Jesus lets him. And it's abundantly clear from the story that Pilate actually prefers to free Jesus; he wants Jesus to continue living (18:38, 19:4, 6, 12). But as you know, it didn't happen. The temple priests blackmail Pilate into killing Jesus (19.12); and Jesus refuses to defend himself (19.9). Nothing that Pilate says or does to Jesus, not even flogging him unmercifully (19.0), deters Jesus from his determination to die.<sup>6</sup>

Fifth, when Jesus is hanging on the cross, he decides when he will die. He declares in 19:28 and 30 that his life is finished. The root Greek word there is *teléō*, which has the sense of something that is complete. That is, Jesus has accomplished everything he set out to do. His life has achieved its full purpose. And with those words, he decides the time has come to relinquish his spirit.

In sum, Jesus is in charge of his own dying. He *wants* his own death to happen; and then he *makes* it happen, because the death of Jesus in this gospel gives glory to God. Death is not something to fear, but something to welcome. Jesus arranges to be lifted up on the cross so he can show the world how to rise above suffering. By the dignified, determined way he handles himself, he shows us how we too might face death with dignity and determination. I propose to you that Jesus models for us a radically different attitude toward death and dying than many of us have. We are scared of death; he is not. We cower before it; he is courageous. We avoid death; he welcomes it. We put it off; he arranges to make it happen. Jesus' approach to death is nothing short of countercultural.

Last fall, *Time* magazine reported on a study published in the journal *Psychological Science*. The psychologists who conducted this study discovered that people who think

carefully about their own death are actually *happier* than people who do not. People who imagine their own process of dying have a more positive outlook on life than people who do not imagine their own dying.<sup>7</sup> It appears, therefore, that our psychological health could be strengthened if we meditate on our own dying. How can we do this? What practices could we do that might help us to welcome death rather than avoid it? I'd like to suggest seven possibilities, some of them a bit radical. These aren't the only options, so perhaps you'll think of better ones.

First, meditate on the faith of the Bible, which asserts that those who are in Christ will continue to have life with God after death. Good passages to meditate on from the gospel of John include 3:16, 11:24-27, and 14:1-3, though there are also many others you could use from different parts of the Bible. Savoring scripture is a good way to help us welcome death.

Second, put a replica of a human skull on your desk at work or in your living room at home. You can buy plastic skulls from stores on the internet. Every time you look at it, the skull can remind you of your mortality. It helps you get used to the idea.

Third, if you like to write, then write a one or two page description of what you imagine your own dying might be like. If you like poetry, then write a poem about your own death. In fact, writing is the method those psychologists used in the study to demonstrate that people who think about their death end up with a brighter outlook on life. If writing is not your thing, then paint or draw your own death.

Fourth, deliberately put yourself into places where you will experience the process of dying. This could be especially useful if you've never watched someone die. For instance, you could work at a hospice or hospital. Any of these environments could bring you in contact with dying people. For a year while I was in college, I lived at the Rieth Rohrer & Ehret funeral home in downtown Goshen and helped out with various chores. That experience exposed me to aspects of death I never would have seen otherwise.

Fifth, go to viewings and funerals. If you can, pause at the casket and gaze respectfully but attentively at the body. If you're so inclined, imagine yourself lying there

in the casket, and say a brief prayer relinquishing yourself into God's care. Use something simple such as "God, into your hands I commit my living and dying."

Sixth, sing a funeral hymn even when there's no funeral. One of my favorites is "Today I live," found at #607 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*. It's rarely sung, but has excellent words with intriguing music. I've often sung this to myself when I ponder my own dying, and you all are welcome to sing it at my funeral.

Seventh, go ahead and plan your own funeral. Stop in at your favorite funeral home and make arrangements. Contact us in the church office for a simple form you can fill out to record your preference for hymns, scripture passages, and so on that you'd like at your funeral or memorial service. We'll then keep in on file for you, and pull it out when you die.

So as we meditate on our death and dying, may we experience the joy of our life with God.

## Notes

1. From [www.lifeintheusa.com/death/hushhush.htm](http://www.lifeintheusa.com/death/hushhush.htm), accessed August 1, 2008.
2. The Greek word *speira*, translated by the NRSV as "a detachment of soldiers" in 18.3, is always used in the New Testament to refer to Roman soldiers, either a cohort of 600 or a maniple of 200 soldiers. Gail O'Day, "The Gospel of John," vol. IX of *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 801.
3. "He" is not in the Greek, which simply reads *egō eimi*, "I am." See the NRSV footnote.
4. O'Day, 802.
5. O'Day, 806. Her chart of all the high priests during the New Testament period is found on page 807.
6. For the sake of time, I am summarizing in this paragraph the consensus of a number of scholars that in his appearance before Pilate, Jesus is in control, fearless, and determined to press on toward death. See O'Day, 799-827; David Rensberger, *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 87-106; and Jacob Jervell, *Jesus in the Gospel of John*, trans. Harry T. Cleven (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 54-61.
7. Sora Song, "Are We Happier Facing Death?" filed October 30, 2007, available at [www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1678129,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1678129,00.html), accessed August 1, 2008.