

“God’s Plan is Life Eternal”  
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia  
The Burial Office for Margaret Walton Wilkinson – 10 January 200  
Lamentations 3:22-26, 31-33; John 14:1-6

“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end.”

That verse comes from The Book of Lamentations, and if you’ve ever read the book, you have to wonder why that particular verse was ever written. Assuming that it’s been a while since most of us dipped into such a cheerfully-named book, allow me a moment to refresh your memory and place this passage in its proper context.

The people who first wrote, heard, and read Lamentations had suffered incredible loss. Their entire way of life had been shattered; Jerusalem, home of the holy Temple, had been destroyed by invading Babylonians; the people carted off as slaves. Many had died in the fighting or in the aftermath. It is hard to imagine the disorientation they felt, as if the world was coming apart at the seams.

Yet in the midst of all that, the author wrote, “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end.” It must have taken a tremendous faith in the power of God’s love to include such a tender verse among the laments of a people whose lives had been viciously destroyed. Those words of comfort can likewise inspire us.

This is one of those days in life when we figure out whether or not we really believe in the power of love to carry us through the tough times. This is one of those days where we need the love of God to lift us up so that we can gracefully endure the loss of a wife, a mother, a friend. For God’s love alone can help make sense of this hurtful day.

Without God's love, there is no hope of heaven, no promise of life everlasting. Without God's love, we suffer without solace, for our memories of the loved and lost, though precious, cannot bring our hearts peace in the way that God's love can. Only God's love, working in and through us, comforts us with the faith that God cares for his own and will never abandon us.

That was the concern of Jesus' disciples when they first heard from him that his time on Earth was short and that he would soon be returned home to his Father in heaven, through the agony of the cross. "What will we do once you've gone," they likely wondered. They were understandably worried. Jesus was their guiding light, the glue that held them together.

So for three chapters in the Gospel of John, we read and hear of how Jesus comforted them with the assurance that all would not be lost, but that rather everything would be gained by his death. They would be reunited someday, "on that farther shore, in a different light," as poet once described it. Often called the Farewell Discourse, this three-chapter passage in John ought to be named the See-You-Later Discourse, because that, in fact, is what Jesus has promised for his disciples.

That's a marvelous promise for the days and weeks and months ahead, when at unexpected moments, the pangs of sorrow will strike, and the cleansing, healing tears will flow. It's an immense comfort to know that a place has been prepared for those we love, for those who love Jesus, and that we share in that hope of life everlasting. It is also a glorious blessing to know that in the depths of our despair, God is right there by our side, eager to embrace us; a God able to say, "I know how it feels to lose someone you love," because God sacrificed Jesus for our sake.

Of course, it can be hard to accept God's love. We may feel unworthy, or we may harbor resentments against God for episodes in life that didn't go the way we'd planned. Accepting God's love also proves difficult, if we lack a strong relationship with Him, a relationship nourished by prayer, worship, and the study of scripture. Without that cultivated relationship, God can hardly be more than some intellectual abstraction we trot out when the occasion requires, and we are left with the pale solace of statements that are trite but not true, like "This was part of God's plan" or "It was just her time." Such sentiments can only be ascribed to a God we don't know very well, for these statements turn God into little more than the Grim Reaper.

You see, life, not death, is God's plan. Remember that the same passage from Lamentations we heard earlier clearly says that "God does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone." If this passage from scripture is true, then how can we hold God responsible for the death of someone we love? Attributing Margaret's death to God's plan may impede our ability to believe in the goodness and mercy of God, who is death's enemy. God defeated death once and for all through His Son Jesus Christ, opening the gates of heaven to all who believe. That's our hope, not some Grim Reaper God who snatches us off the Earth to fulfill some grandiose "Plan."

Our hope is rooted in the simple trust that God does love us, despite the doubt we might harbor because of the pain we feel. God loves us more than could ever know or imagine. It is this love, made manifest on a cross by Christ Jesus, that helps us accept this as a day both of mourning and of celebration; a day of remembrance and a day of looking to the future, when by God's grace, we might all be reunited. For the witness of

scripture is true, “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end.”

To live into that promise, though, we need to remain vigilant for God’s presence. We need to support each other in actively seeking God through prayer and worship, and we need to stay connected with others who have suffered loss and who have endured.

We do not know with any certainty what great mysteries lay beyond this life, but we can be fully confident that the God who blesses us so richly in this life will remain faithful in the life to come. We can be at peace knowing that Margaret is at peace, no longer limited by the suffering of disease. For the witness of scripture is true, even in the midst of great sorrow: “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end.” Amen.