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## *We Die The Way We Live*

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler  
Atlanta, Georgia  
The First Sunday of Advent, Year C**

I get asked a lot what death is going to be like. These days, I get asked especially what the second coming will be like. I used to answer that I really didn't know about death, that no one knows, really. We Christians believe in resurrection, and in new life; but we cannot exactly describe it. We Episcopalians also believe in the second coming of Jesus, but we stop short of predicting its time. We know, in our heads, that we will all die. But, in our hearts, we rarely imagine its emotional impact.

But I have begun to give a different answer when folks ask me what death is going to be like. I have been with a lot of people as they lay dying. I have seen lots of very different kinds of folks die in lots of very different ways.

And here is what I have discovered. Except for the most sudden or dramatic or unusual circumstances -and there are some-- people die the same way they have lived. The way most people die is the same way they have lived.

People who have lived happy lives generally die fairly happy. People who have lived fairly angry lives generally die angry. People who have lived fairly peaceful lives die rather peacefully. People who have lived violent lives generally die violently.

I find this principle in scripture. When the common people of scripture prepare to meet their God, when they prepare for judgment of some sort of another, they generally discover that the God they meet is the same one they have been worshipping in their regular lives. Folks who believe in an angry God generally meet an angry God as they lay dying. Folks who believe in a loving God generally meet a loving God as they die. Folks who believe in a generous God generally meet a generous God.

One of my favorite parables is the parable of the talents according to St. Matthew. A man leaves his country for a time and gives five talents to one servant, two to another, and one to the last. When he returns, the first servant reveals that he has made five more talents. A second servant says he that he, too, has doubled his talents. "Well done, good and faithful servant," says the man, "enter into the joy of your master."

But the third servant comes whimpering up and says, "Here is your talent. I knew that you were a harsh man, and so I was afraid. I hid the talent in the ground. And with that, the man does reveal himself to be quite a harsh man indeed. He had not seemed harsh to the other two servants. The man was quite generous to the servants who acted in hope and faith! But the man was certainly harsh to the servant who thought him harsh. (Matthew 25.14-30).

On this First Sunday of Advent, the Church begins to prepare for the birth of Jesus, four weeks from now. We will rejoice at the surprising arrival of a young child, new life, in a lonely manger far away from here, far away in both space and time. But our lessons for these first Sundays of Advent do not focus on the birth two thousand years ago. They focus on images and visions of how Jesus might come again, a second coming.

For most of us, that second coming of Jesus will occur when we die. And many of us have been taught to expect the worst.

Oftentimes, the events of the world around us do look like the worst. Distress among the nations. Signs of doom and gloom in the stars and in the seas.

Some of our fiction writers reinforce the anxiety. "People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world," says Jesus in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 21.26). That, too, is such a true line from scripture. A lot of people do not die from actual physical circumstance. They die from the anxious anticipation of the final physical circumstance! They die from increased anxiety and panic, from fear and foreboding!

I choose not to face death with fear and foreboding. And I choose not to anticipate my meeting with God as an event of fear and foreboding. I do not believe the second coming of Jesus will cause me fear and foreboding. I know there are plenty of Christian preachers and writers who have made a ministry out of drumming up fear and foreboding; but I am not one of them.

I read a different kind of exhortation in the Bible. Yes, I know there are images of fear and destruction, no question about that. But I believe the stronger images of the Bible are images of strength, of peace, of faith, and of hope.

Listen to how Saint Paul encouraged one of his first Christian communities, the church in Thessalonica. It is generally thought that our oldest New Testament book is Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. Back in the middle of the first century A.D., maybe around 50 A.D., that community thought surely that Jesus was returning -physically""in their own lifetimes.

How did Saint Paul speak to them? Did he speak of great catastrophe that would consume them? No, Saint Paul says very clearly that "God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5.9).

And so, in the scripture we have heard today, Paul speaks of how we should act at the second coming, in the last days. He says, "May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all. ,And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints" (1 Thessalonians 3.12-13).

Jesus speaks in much the same way when he speaks of the last days. Sure, there are images of travail and tribulation. Most of us know that times of travail and tribulation are always with us. It is the nature of the earthly life, and the nature of the Christian life, to go through trial and tribulation. The question is how should we behave in our earthly and Christian life? The question is not trying to predict every calendar catastrophe and crazy prophecy. How should we act?

And Jesus' answer is consistently clear: "Be alert, be watchful, be in prayer." These are exactly what we should be doing every day! Watch for Jesus *every* day. Watch for salvation *every* day! And in today's gospel from Luke, Jesus says "stand up and raise up your heads;" don't run away and hide. "Stand up and raise up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21.28).

As for me, I am looking forward to meeting this Jesus at the second coming. It may be in the air, as Thessalonians says elsewhere. It may be in a great earthquake or storm. It may be during a famine or plague. But I know I will not meet him with fear and foreboding.

I may meet this Jesus at his coming today. I may meet him in the face of the hungry and the thirsty, in the faces of those in prison or of those who need clothing. Jesus said in Matthew 25 that was how he was present in the world today. When I meet him there, I will not meet him with fear and foreboding.

I may meet this Jesus in one of you today, in the faces and in the lives of each of you who try valiantly to love one another. The late Epistle of John said the same thing: "The one who loves is the one who knows God."

That is the God I want to know. That is the Jesus I want to meet. The Jesus who loves. If I can love that God now, if I can meet that Jesus now, then my own last days will not bring anything new at all. I will die the same way I have lived, seeking to love God with all my heart, and soul, and my mind - and seeking to love my neighbor as myself.

AMEN.

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Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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