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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

July 31, 2022

Proper 13, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23

Psalm 49:1-11

Colossians 3:1-11

Luke 12:13-21

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“What do mortals get from all their toil under the sun? One who has toiled must leave it all behind to be enjoyed by another. Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”

When I was about fifteen years old my family took an amazing trip to Egypt. We went to the pyramids; we saw the Sphinx. We visited ancient stone temples on the river Nile. And we went to the Valley of the Kings, home of the famous tomb of Tutankhamun among dozens of other royal tombs. Most of them have been looted over the centuries. Most have had the paintings on the walls have fade away. But not all. And so at one point I found myself standing inside a tomb where—for whatever reason—the climate had preserved the painted walls with colors as fresh and vivid as they were almost three thousand years ago. Long before the time of Jesus. Probably even long before the words from our Old Testament reading were written.

The ceiling was painted with the night sky in a stunning rich, deep blue, studded with golden stars that seemed to glow from within. All around on the walls were

pictures of gods and goddesses, people and animals, mythological scenes and prayers for the dead. It was utterly foreign to anything from a modern person's experience. And yet it was also utterly familiar—because it was so deeply human. There in that space I found myself—a fifteen-year-old normally preoccupied with homework and video games and school crushes—thinking about how short life is, and how that pharaoh and I and everyone else who has ever lived has had a lot in common. We're born, we're here for a little while, and then we die. We don't know what death holds in store for us. Our little lifespan is no more than a tiny blip on of the long course of eternity.

We are all mortal. And how we deal with that fact has a lot to do with how we live our lives. The philosopher Ernest Becker believed that, unlike what Sigmund Freud thought, our deepest, most repressed fear is not sex but death. We all face mortality; but we respond to it in different ways. The ancient Egyptians responded by creating a culture almost obsessed with death, full of elaborate tombs and mummifications and funeral rites—at least for the wealthy. Our culture seems to have a different relationship with death. We don't see death in our everyday lives anymore: fewer and fewer of us die at home, more and more of us are spending the last days and even years of our lives in hospitals and care facilities. Many of us prefer not to think much about death, our own or the people's we love. Instead of obsession, we may be closer to repression.

But whether we're obsessed by death or whether we repress it, one of the typical ways we respond to our mortality is by storing up possessions. Somehow, the stockpiling of stuff makes us feel safe and protected, like the man in our gospel reading today who already has much more than he can ever use and decides to store up even more—not realizing it won't do him any good because he can't take

it with him. The mummified pharaohs were surrounded with treasures beyond counting, all the way up to statues that were meant to come to life and be their slaves in the afterlife.

We don't tend to bury treasures with our dead loved ones, but we still do know about the temptation to store up possessions. Here in Northern California, one of the great economic regions of the world, we see incredible wealth fueled by technology, right alongside people with nothing who have been left behind by an economy with no place for them. California is maybe one of the best places on earth to read this parable of the rich man, where as Jesus says, possessions are worth nothing if we aren't *rich toward God*. Our society sometimes encourages us to buy into the idea that "the one who dies with the most toys wins." But our gospel reading tells us something different.

That's not to say it's the possessions themselves that get us into trouble so much as the hold they have on us. Paul says in this morning's epistle that greed is actually *idolatry*: it's putting something else in the place of God. It's the belief that through our own hard work or our own possessions we can somehow keep ourselves safe from harm.

Our gospel reading emphasizes the foolishness of the rich man who wastes all his possessions by hoarding them for himself. The Old Testament reading we heard from Ecclesiastes earlier emphasizes more of the positive side of working hard and doing good things, and then the sadness of realizing that we can't control what will happen to all our good work after we die. But what all these readings have in common is that they show us that our life is fragile: we all die, rich or poor, and there is nothing we can do about that on our own.

But here's the thing. We're gathered here today in the name of Jesus Christ. As Christians, one of our core beliefs is that death is not the final word. We believe we are held in the hands of a God who has conquered death. And if that's true, that fear of death that leads us to hoard God's blessings doesn't have to control us anymore.

I want to offer us three ideas from these scriptures for today. The first one is this: make friends with our mortality. That may sound strange or kind of morbid. But it's an ancient spiritual practice to reflect on the fact that each one of us is only here on this earth for a very short time, to realize that for the beloved children of God death is not our enemy, and to let that influence the choices we make here and now. In our hymnal we have a hymn from St. Francis that calls death "our gentle sister, who leads home the child of God." Make friends with your mortality.

The second thing is this: hold on loosely to our stuff. Possessions are good things; they are gifts from God. But they only matter if, instead of hoarding them, we use them to become *rich toward God*. That means using them to bless others, to create beauty, and to serve the world in God's name. The great evangelist John Wesley said that as a Christian, you should "earn all you can; save all you can; give all you can." He practiced what he preached: as a young man he found he could live on 28 pounds a year. As his income grew to 50, then 100, then eventually 1400 pounds per year, he continued to live on 28—and give the rest away.¹ It was something like earning \$1.5 million a year and living on \$40,000.

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/1987/winter/8711027.html>;
<https://www.jefftk.com/p/history-of-earning-to-give-iii-john-wesley>;
<http://www.drurywriting.com/keith/wesley.htm>

We may find it hard to rise to that level. But whoever we are, no matter how high or how low our income, we can pay attention to how we're using the resources God has given us to bless others. Giving stuff away is one of the core practices of the Christian spiritual life. As many have discovered, it's liberating and can even be fun.

And the third thing is this: be on the lookout for glory. In the end it's not what we own that makes our life worthwhile. The real riches in life are the traces of glory that are shot through God's entire creation. If we have eyes to see it, we can see those traces everywhere we look: in the beauty of this city, in the face of a sister or brother, in the music we sing, the laugh of a child. There is glory even in the places of our deepest vulnerability and pain: in a hospital bed, a homeless shelter, a prison. The whole universe is filled with the glory and the poignancy of everything God has made. That's not something we can hoard. We can only open our hearts to it and give thanks.

Befriend your mortality. Hold onto stuff lightly. Look for traces of glory. And may the Spirit of Jesus lead us beyond all fear of death into the kingdom of everlasting abundance.