“A Good Death”

Deuteronomy 34:1–12

Rev. Henry Pascual

Prayer: *May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

In the final scene of the movie *Legends of the Fall*, Tristan, played by Brad Pitt, dies wrestling a bear. His friend One Stab, a native American elder who narrates the story, looks back on the moment and says, "It was a good death." Earlier in the film, One Stab observes that "every warrior hopes a good death will find him."

But what makes a good death?

Recently, I joked with someone that my idea of a good death would be dying peacefully—or maybe not so peacefully—dropping dead of a heart attack right in the middle of a sermon. My wife, Des, wasn't amused! (C’mon, Des, at least I’ll die doing something I love!)

But seriously, what constitutes a good death?

Steve Paulson, host of the Wisconsin Public Radio program *To the Best of Our Knowledge*, once posed this question to a panel of experts: a psychiatrist, a philosophy professor, and a sociologist.

Their answers were interesting. From a medical perspective, a good death is one that is free from unnecessary pain and prolonged suffering. From a personal perspective, it means retaining dignity and having one's wishes respected. And from a social perspective, a good death is being surrounded by family and community rather than isolated in an institutionalized, machine-managed hospital setting, feeling alone.[1]

Those are meaningful ways of thinking about death. They remind us that how we die matters, and that compassion, dignity, and human connection matter.

Of course, not every death is peaceful and gentle. Some die suddenly, through accidents or violence. Some endure prolonged suffering. Some are

[1] “What is a Good Death” NourFoundation. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sbGALYWcrA

surrounded by loved ones; others die without family nearby. Some relationships remain broken or unresolved.

We cannot always control the circumstances of death. And we should never measure the worth of someone's life—or the quality of their death—by how peaceful or well-attended their final moments were.

Our Christian hope rests somewhere deeper. It rests in the assurance that, whatever circumstances surround our dying, **we belong to a God whose love accompanies us through life and beyond death.**

Our scripture today offers us a beautiful image of that hope.

On his final journey, Moses stands on a mountaintop. From there, God shows him the Promised Land—the land he has spent his life leading the people toward, but will never enter himself.

Then Moses dies.

And there's a remarkable detail in our passage. It says that God buried him in a valley in Moab.

Think about that for a moment. God buried Moses.

What a tender image! The great leader who had guided an entire people through the wilderness is now in God's care. God did not forget or abandon him.

And Moses was not forgotten by his people, either. They mourned him for thirty days. God received Moses' life, and his community remembered his death.

There's something beautiful about that: God's loving care and the presence of a community that remembers.

But what does this mean for us as Christians? What does a good death look like when understood through the lens of our faith?

Let me tell you another story.

In September 1962, Pope John XXIII was diagnosed with stomach cancer. Born Angelo Roncalli to a family of modest sharecroppers, he became beloved by ordinary people. As pope, he initiated significant reforms in the Roman Catholic Church through what became known as the Second Vatican Council.

People affectionately called him "Good Pope John."

Eight months after his diagnosis, he lay dying in the Vatican. As he received his final Communion and anointing, he reflected with gratitude on the humble Christian family into which he was born and the faith that shaped his life.

Something rather touching happened during those final moments. The papal sacristan, Petrus Canisius Van Lierde, overcome with emotion, forgot the proper order of the anointing. Pope John gently helped him.

His secretary, Archbishop Loris Capovilla, overcome with grief, fell to his knees, weeping, and buried his face in the bedcovers. The pope calmly gave instructions about his final hours, saying: "Courage, my son. I am a bishop, and I must die as a bishop, with simplicity but with majesty, and you must help me. Go get the people together."

"Holy Father, they are waiting," his secretary replied.[2]

"Go get the people together." I find these words from the pope deeply moving. The pope understood something important about Christian death. He did not want his final moments to be simply a private event. He wanted to die surrounded by the community of faith.

In his book *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral*, Thomas Long reflects on Pope John's final words and identifies three important elements of a Christian funeral: **simplicity**, **majesty**, and the **gathering of people.**[3]

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[2] As cited in Thomas Long's *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), xi who compiled John XXIII's death from Lawrence Elliott's *I Will Be Called John: A Biography of Pope John XXIII* (London: Collins, 1974), 320, and "Vatican Revolutionary," *Time*, June 7, 1963, www.time.com/magazine/article/0.9171,874758,00.html.

[3] Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), xii.

That last element—the gathering of people—is particularly important.

Long suggests that a Christian funeral is much more than a memorial service or an opportunity to say goodbye. It is **the completion of our baptismal journey.**[4]

Let me explain what this means.

Our Christian journey begins at the baptismal font. There, we are welcomed into the community of Christ, embraced by God's grace, and given a place among God's people.

From that moment on, we journey through life through the Christian rites: confirmation, marriage, and ordination for some. We worship together, pray together, serve together, and support one another through joys and sorrows. Though our paths may lead us to move away and join new congregations throughout our lives, the core rhythm of our faith remains unchanged—wherever we go, we continue to live out our commitment within a gathering of believers.

And when our earthly journey comes to an end, the church gathers once more. Though it may be a different congregation than the one where we were baptized, it is the same body of Christ that surrounds us. The faith community gathers around us to give thanks for our life, remember the promises of our faith, and commend us into God's eternal care.

In that sense, the funeral becomes a meaningful bookend to our baptismal journey. We are welcomed into the community of faith in baptism and that community gathers to commend us to God in death.

This is what Pope John XXIII seemed to understand as he approached death. His request to "get the people together" was more than a desire for company at his bedside. It expressed his deep conviction that we belong to one another in life and in death.

For this reason, I encourage you, whenever possible, to consider **bringing your loved ones to the church for their funeral service.**

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[4] Long, 79-82.

It is a meaningful way for the church community that welcomed them in baptism to gather once more, give thanks for their lives, and entrust them to God's eternal care.

Please notice that I said, “whenever possible.” I recognize that circumstances differ from family to family. For various reasons, some families may not be able to hold a funeral or memorial service in the church. I respect those circumstances. The grace of God is not confined to a church building, and a person's life is no less meaningful because their funeral takes place somewhere else.

But the underlying hope remains the same: We belong to God, and we belong to one another.

This understanding of a shared journey toward God's promised future accompanied by the faithful runs deep throughout our heritage. We hear it beautifully expressed in the traditional African American spiritual, "Deep River."

> *Deep River, my home is over Jordan, Deep River, Lord,*
> *I want to cross over into campground.*

The spiritual emerged from the experience of enslaved Black Americans, who found strength and hope in biblical stories of liberation, including the story of Moses and the crossing of the Jordan River into the Promised Land.

For those who sang it, crossing the river was more than an isolated journey. It was a shared longing for freedom, rest, and a better home beyond the suffering of this life.

They sang together, holding one another up through the promise of a future God had prepared for them.

And that same collective hope echoes in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

On the night before he was assassinated, King stood before a crowd in Memphis, Tennessee. Reflecting on Moses' final glimpse of the Promised Land, he said:

> *I've been to the mountaintop... I may not get there with you, but we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.*

Even as Dr. King faced the possibility of his own death, his vision remained collective: *we, as a people.* He spoke of a community, on a shared journey toward God's promise.

And perhaps that is where our reflection on a good death brings us.

A good death is not necessarily peaceful, painless, or even surrounded by family and friends. We know that life and death are not always that kind.

But as Christians, we trust that no matter how or where death comes, **we are held by the One who created us, accompanied by the Christ who walks with us, and surrounded by the faith and love of a community that extends beyond what we can see.**

From the baptismal font to the final commendation, from the beginning of our journey to its end, we belong to God and to one another.

That is the deep joy of our faith: even as we face the end of our journey, we never walk alone.

That, I believe, is the promise of a good death.

Thanks be to God. Amen.