

LIVE AS CHILDREN OF LIGHT

Goodbyes 2001-2013

Norris Battin

LIVE AS CHILDREN OF LIGHT

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To Susan

GRIEF

O WHO will give me tears? Come, all ye springs,
Dwell in my head and eyes; come, clouds and rain;
My grief hath need of all the watery things
That nature hath produced: let every vein
Suck up a river to supply mine eyes,
My weary weeping eyes, too dry for me,
Unless they get new conduits, new supplies,
To bear them out, and with my state agree.
What are two shallow fords, two little spouts
Of a lesser world? The greater is but small,
A narrow cupboard for my griefs and doubts,
Which want provision in the midst of all.
Verses, ye are too fine a thing, too wise
For my rough sorrows; cease, be dumb and mute,
Give up your feet and running to mine eyes,
And keep your measures for some lover's lute,
Whose grief allows him music and a rhyme;
For mine excludes both measure, tune, and time:
Alas, my God!

*"The Poems of George Herbert." Ernest Rhys, ed.
London: Walter Scott, 1886*

Acknowledgments

Grace, Peace and Love to my children, Mike and Sara, who have shared and endured this loss with me.

Thanks to Peter+ who led me to understand, among many things, the meaning of, "We thank you for setting us at tasks which demand our best efforts" (BCP page 836) and who has supported and guided the "Praying Our Goodbyes" ministry at Saint Michael & All Angels Corona del Mar from its beginning; and to all who have served as members of our working group and assisted in our liturgy over the years, especially to Meg who first recommended Sister Rupp's work; and to Jill for her Christian counsel and friendship.

Thanks to Sara and Greg for proofreading and design.

Note to readers: This update of "Live as Children of Light, Goodbyes 2001-2009" adds homilies from 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013. In doing this update, I have edited these to remove the redundant parts of their introduction which repeat at the beginning of service mainly for the benefit of newcomers to Praying Our Goodbyes. Should you want to refresh yourself about the background of the service, please read the introduction to "Life Has Changed, Not Ended," on page 71 which is the most complete description of the current status of the service.

Foreword

The “Note” on page 507 of the “Book of Common Prayer” expresses Episcopalian/Anglican theology clearly and concisely:

“Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we, too, shall be raised. (Then, after quoting Romans 8:38-39...) This joy, however, does not make human grief unchristian.”

Because grief, lament and mourning are as central to living a wholly human life as thanksgiving, gratitude and praise should be, Norris Battin has given his parish, Saint Michael & All Angels Episcopal Church in Corona del Mar, California, a great gift initiating a “Praying Our Goodbyes” ministry. Named after Joyce Rupp’s 1988 book, a spiritual companion through life’s losses and sorrows, “Praying Our Goodbyes” witnesses that everyone has unique goodbyes and that there are inevitably times of losing someone or something that has given a person’s life meaning and value. Like Rupp’s book, our ministry initiated by Norris is for anyone who has experienced loss, whether a job change, the end of a relationship, the death of a loved one, a financial struggle, a mid-life crisis, or an extended illness. It is designed to help us reflect, ritualize, and re-orient ourselves and to help heal the hurts caused by goodbyes and the anxiety encountered when one chapter of life ends and another begins.

It is all about the spirituality of change!

In his little 2003 book, “For All the Saints: Remembering the Christian Departed,” Bishop N.T. Wright, makes a convincing case for the line between body-bound life here in God’s creation and “life after

death" in immediacy with God being very thin. Those of us who have been blessed to hear Norris' homilies/sermons at our annual "Praying Our Goodbyes" worship services have experienced directly the love between Norris and Susan Battin, love which clearly transcends Susan's journey from this life into the next in 1998.

Together forever, they witness that only love lasts forever (1 Corinthians 13:8a) because God is love (1 John 4:8b).

Readers of "Live as Children of Light" will be provoked to think about the thinness of spaces between chapters of eternal life and encouraged to live life in light, the light of God.

(The Very Rev'd Canon) Peter D. Haynes

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Praying Our Goodbyes

May the Lord now be in all our hearts and upon my lips, that every thought and word may be wholly for the honor and glory of His name.

A few weeks ago I was browsing through the New York Times and came across the obituary of a Virginia State Senator named Emily Couric.

Wondering if she was related to TV's Katie, I read on and yes, it was Katie's sister, who had died of pancreatic cancer at the age of 54.

My eyes jumped quickly to the last paragraph and, yes, "Survived by her husband George, her parents and three siblings."

I silently said a prayer for all of them, and then as I often do these days, came quickly in touch with the agony that, as a widower, George must presently be enduring, and what the near future would most likely hold for him.

While each loss is uniquely personal, I know that George and I still have a lot in common having lost our spouses in their mid-fifties.

Last year about this time, I wrote a poem called simply, "Christmas." It begins:

On the third Christmas without you
The tears are still much more than snowflakes:
Melting memories mingling with a persistent present
Where misery's still covered with a thin veneer of
purpose that turns too often to a vacant stare.

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I suspect that all of you who have come to this special service this evening have some feelings like this, as the season approaches that usually brings joy and light to so many others.

Whether you've lost a relative, a relationship, a job, a dream, a home, your health or a special pet, you've said "Goodbye" to something important in your life and right now are feeling the ache of that loss perhaps more acutely than ever.

Many writers have told us how the pain of loss intensifies during the holiday season: the phenomenon often called a "Blue Christmas."

The popular song of the same name, incidentally, was written in 1948, and by the end of 1998, was number 14 on ASCAP's list of the top 75 Christmas Songs of the century—showing, I think, just how widely felt this seasonal reaction to loss is in our culture.

Experts say it's because Christmas is our most important family holiday: often featuring reunions of loved ones filled with warm memories of happy times. The collision of Christmas memories with a recent numbing loss can generate dark despair and disconsolate depression brought about by shock, fear, guilt and loneliness.

Christmas 2001 will be especially "blue" for many in our nation. We still grieve for an indescribable human tragedy, and also for the loss of our country's innocence that only a few, who no one listened to, could imagine would ever happen.

For me, September 11th created the "Blue Christmas Effect" three months early.

You may have experienced this too. Most of the gains I had made during the year dealing with my own personal losses were instantly crushed under the weight of falling debris and suffocated in the stench from Ground Zero. My grief became again, briefly, disabling.

Praying Our Goodbyes

So tonight, we who know this Blue Christmas pain come together to gain comfort and strength through our liturgy and through our community, and from a special resource that I'd like to share with you in the hope that you too may find it valuable.

We took the title of this service, "Praying Our Goodbyes," from a book by Cervite Sister Joyce Rupp in which she describes a faith-based approach to coping with the inevitable goodbyes we all must face in our journey through life.

She tells us that a goodbye is "an empty place in us" and introduces the idea of the "goodbye—hello—goodbye" cycle, a process that we will repeat many, many times, as we move from leave-taking to engagement to leave-taking, again and again in many areas of our lives.

She describes it this way:

"We say goodbye to parents, spouses, children and friends, sometimes for just a day or a year, and sometimes until we meet them on the other side of this life.

"We leave familiar places and secure homes. We bid farewell to strong, healthy bodies, burden-free spirits or minds. We change teachers, schools, parishes and managers, sometimes spouses or religions.

"We change our ideas, our values, our self-image and our way of interpreting life's situations.

"We place parents in nursing homes, allow children to experience risk-taking and growth, say no to love relationships that would be inappropriate or possibly harmful to us or to others."

All of these, and many other situations we face regularly, involve some kind of painful leave-taking and create for us a goodbye.

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Sister Rupp has a hopeful message. She wants to teach us how to approach our leave-takings spiritually, not just “saying” our goodbyes but “praying” our goodbyes, as we learn to grow in our relationship with a loving, comforting God who does not want us to suffer, a God who will be with us through our goodbyes and who will lead us to new hellos.

When we learn to do this, we can say, “Go, God be with you. I entrust you to God. The God of strength, courage, comfort, hope and love is with you. The God who promises to wipe away all tears will hold you close and will fill your emptiness.”

With this too, we can let go and be free to move on.

Sr. Rupp finds two Biblical parallels in the goodbye—hello—goodbye cycle. First, she tells us to stand strong in the Resurrection, remembering that Jesus risen is a proclamation of hello after an agonizing goodbye. Second, she helps us think about the Exodus as a metaphor for our stretches of inner wilderness of discouragement and doubt, just as the Israelites slowly moved out of their land of slavery to a place of true freedom.

And finally, she gives us a way to pray our Goodbyes, four steps where we recognize, reflect and ritualize our losses and then reorient ourselves to accept a new future. As time is short, I’ll let you explore these for yourself by reading and meditating on her book, which I commend to all of you.

Let me conclude with a few thoughts about that most difficult part of all: letting go. Sister Rupp says that to let go is to, “allow something or someone to be left behind in such a way that we are free to continue toward a new country that is waiting to be revealed to us.” She challenges us to recognize that we need to let go, to accept the wisdom of doing it and to take action to leave the grief of loss behind us.

Praying Our Goodbyes

Most of us know intuitively that this is right, but also, just how hard it is to do. Here, she offers no magic, no shortcuts and no timetable. Gently, she lets us know that letting go requires surrender to God, an appreciation of nature and a close kinship with our families and communities.

In the end, she reminds us that the human spirit is astounding in its resiliency and its ability to recover hope. That is what the resurrection proclaims: the possibility of transformation, the belief that we can be filled with new life and that the future will bless us.

In John 16, we read:

*A woman in childbirth suffers
Because her time has come;
But when she has given birth to the child she forgets the suffering
In her joy that (a child) has been born into the world.
So it is with you: you are sad now, but I shall see you again,
and your
Hearts will be full of joy,
And that joy no one shall take from you.*

-John 16:21-22

That is the joy I pray will come to all of us here tonight as we await in this Advent season the one whose birth will be our next hello.

December 2001

One Sunday in August

May the Lord now be in all our hearts and upon my lips, that every thought and word may be wholly for the honor and glory of His name.

My text for tonight is this question St. Paul asks in his letter to the Romans:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ?

-Romans 8: 35

I think I'm a familiar breed of parishioner to many clergy these days: the "Cradle Episcopalian" who after many years of off-and-on church going has found, in his sixties, a new reason to bring faith back into his life, but one who still has the occasional doubt.

Our rector, Peter Haynes, is fond of quoting Frederick Beuchner who says in his book "Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC" that, "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving," and I must say I agree with that.

And I suspect that many of us here tonight have encountered a bout of doubt in the midst of our recent losses.

The Roman Catholic philosopher and writer Peter Kreeft put this another way, perhaps a bit more hopefully, in his book "Making Sense out of Suffering":

He said, "Doubt is glorious. Only one who can doubt can believe," and he added, in another message to those of us who grieve, "just as only one who can despair can hope."

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So putting my current doubt aside one Sunday morning this past August, I was sitting in the adult education class here at St. Mike's, and I found myself wanting badly to answer the question that was being posed to the group, "Does anyone want to share an experience where he or she knew that God was really present and intervening in his life?"

Just the week before, Father Haynes had talked to us in his homily about "God Spotting", persuading us that God was present, not hidden, and that we must be open and receptive to the possibility that God is among us.

Now, our discussion of the Bible readings for the day was illuminating Father Peter's remarks.

I had had an experience like that, and I wanted badly to tell my story.

But I was reluctant to do so, not only because I'd told it privately to some and didn't remember to exactly who, but also because I didn't want such a personal narrative to intrude abruptly on a group of fellow parishioners and perhaps ruin their Sunday.

I don't have that reluctance with you gathered here tonight.

My story is about a loss I've had, and we're here together this evening because we share in common the experience of a major loss in our lives. We all know what it's like.

And it's at this time of the year when others share in the joy of the holiday season, when our losses can be especially intense and painful for us.

Many have written about how the pain of loss intensifies during the holiday season: the heartache that's often called a "Blue Christmas."

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They say it's because Christmas is our most important family holiday, often with reunions of loved ones filled with warm memories of happy times.

The collision of Christmas memories with a recent numbing loss can generate despair and depression brought about by shock, fear, guilt and loneliness.

I suspect that all of you who have come to this special service this evening have some feelings like this as the season approaches that brings happiness to so many others.

Whether you've lost a spouse, a relative, a relationship, a job, a dream, a home, your health or a special pet, you've said "Goodbye" to something important and right now are feeling the ache of that loss perhaps more acutely than ever.

Our service tonight is designed to help us recognize this special pain and look to God for the courage and strength to "pray our goodbyes" to these losses and move our lives beyond them.

So I hope that this personal reminiscence of a "God Spotting" that I had now some four years ago will help open your hearts to the possibility of spotting God in your own life, particularly at this most difficult season.

And if you're one who has heard the story before, I hope you'll think that it ages well.

It happened like this:

Two days before my wife Susan died, Father Haynes talked quietly with me and my son Mike and daughter Sara—Sue's stepchildren for twenty-two years—outside the ICU at Hoag Hospital where she lay unconscious.

We discussed our lives together and Susan's faith.

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Later, at her bedside, we joined hands with her and prayed as Peter gave her last rights.

And this I know: God was there with us in that room.

I've no doubt about it. None at all. I felt God's presence as surely as I feel the presence of all of you here tonight.

In Peter's terms, I had "spotted" Him. And if you asked me where God was, I'd answer promptly, "High up in the far left corner of the room."

I'd normally be unwilling to share this last detail lest you'd think I was hallucinating, but, again thanks to our adult education class, I'd been introduced to Marcus Borg, a contemporary theologian well known for his interpretations of the life of Jesus, and reading Borg has made me feel a bit better about what I experienced.

In his book "The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith", Borg discusses a variety of sacred experiences that people have had, and he includes several in which people report an awareness of God's presence.

In a footnote, he reports that 80 percent of participants in one of his workshops could identify such an experience and were eager to talk about it.

He calls this the "dailiness of God" which seems to match quite nicely with what Peter was saying in his homily about God Spotting.

But I must admit to being both shaken and a perplexed during this experience.

"Why are You here?" I wondered to myself.

And I was so very angry. "How can You let this happen? She's so young." "Now that You're here, fix it!" I screamed silently.

One Sunday in August

There I was at sixty years of age pleading with the *deus ex machina* God of my youth, the God who made good things happen if we prayed for them, and yet of whom we always wondered, without much of an answer, “Why does God let bad things happen?”

Peter Kreeft’s imagery from “Making Sense out of Suffering” captures me perfectly at that moment. “To question God’s goodness is not just an intellectual experiment,” Kreeft points out. “It is rebellion or tears. It is a little child with tears in his eyes looking up at Daddy and weeping, ‘Why?’”

The hurt child, Kreeft explains, needs not so much an explanation as reassurance.

And reassurance is what we get, he tells us: the reassurance of the Father in the person of Jesus, “He who has seen me has seen the Father,” Kreeft writes quoting John 14:9.

And, understanding this now, I know something that I didn’t know then.

In that hospital room we were not with a God who was there to answer our “Whys”, but with the “com-passionate” God that our rector described in his summer homily, a God suffering together with us, as we feared for the future.

At the time, so overwhelmed with grief, I didn’t understand that. He was there to give us the reassurance that Kreeft describes, but I missed it. I wasn’t open to it, so distracted was I by my personal “whys” of Sue’s death.

Today, while still curious about the “whys” of suffering, I’m quite willing to leave further explorations to the theologians and the philosophers.

Certainly these remain important questions, but if I recognize instead my personal need for reassurance in my immediate grief, I can find

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an answer to my question about why God was in the room, and I can, even today, take great comfort from it.

In August, Peter said, "Those who love God, those called according to God's purpose, learn new ways to find the good, even in the midst of pain."

In other words, nothing will ever separate us from the love, and the comfort, of Christ.

Marcus Borg has observed that the decision of fourth century Christians to celebrate Jesus' birth at the time of the winter solstice is a message that Jesus is a light in our darkness. For those of us experiencing a Blue Christmas this night, the light of our Savior's birth is magnified by the promise of his never ending comfort and love. It's a most glorious brightness that illuminates our solemn Christmas darkness.

Let us pray:

God of mystery, we turn our hearts to you. We come before you in need of peace, grateful for the mystery of life and keenly aware of your promises of guidance and protection. We want to place our trust in you, but our hearts grow fearful and anxious. We forget so easily that you will be with us in all we experience. Teach us to be patient with the transformation of our life and to be open to the changes which we are now experiencing.

-“Praying Our Goodbyes,” page 146.

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Returning to Jerusalem

May the Lord now be in all our hearts and upon my lips, that every thought and word may be wholly for the honor and glory of His name.

M

y text this evening is from St. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians:

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

-1Th 4:13

And as a modern subtext, this remarkable piece of reportage from the November 24th edition of the London newspaper, the Telegraph:

"It was to be expected that Victoria Short would have time only for herself and her children when she attended the service held yesterday in memory of her husband and staff killed in the bombing of the British consulate in Istanbul.

"But as she left Christ Church, a small Anglican enclave hidden in the steep and winding back streets of Turkey's largest city, the widow of Roger Short, the consul general who died at his desk, greeted all those she knew with a smile and a word.

"Even in grief, she was the perfect diplomat's wife.

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“Only when she emerged into the autumn sunlight did she for a moment surrender to her sense of loss. ‘For everybody else each day is going to get better, but for me every day is going to get worse,’ she said.”

I've watched a lot of people easily shake off their loss.

They lose a job; they're back to work six months later—often at a higher pay grade.

They put down the cat at the vet and they pick up a kitty at the pound on the way home.

Relationship ended? In today's vernacular: “Not a problem.” The serial monogamy merry-go-round quickly propels them into the next one.

Others can't shake off a loss as easily.

Often depressed, they refuse to reconnect, preferring to keep themselves turned inward, trying with quiet, lonely desperation to understand what happened, why, and where God was when tragedy struck.

No value judgments here: just some observations about how people deal differently with their grief.

So as I mark the 5-year anniversary of my wife's death with a “milestone-date” retrospective of my grieving process, I find myself raising two sets of questions.

First, do a lot of us today skip mourning our losses? If so what have we missed and what's the ultimate cost? And have I skipped it?

On the other hand, do some of us grieve too long, remaining immobilized and unable to move on? And am I stuck?

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I suspect that most of us don't find our grief such an either-or proposition. Sometimes we haven't grieved enough. At other times we've grieved too much. Finding a balance so we can live productively is often difficult.

Last year after this service a good friend who was suffering grievously through the loss of a relationship asked me somewhat cynically, "Is that—meaning the service we'd just completed—supposed to fix it?" And around the anniversary this year of the death of a spouse another friend asked, "Do we have to go through this every year?"

Which of them had grieved too much? Which had not grieved enough? To quote the English poet Samuel Butler, "Life is like music, it must be composed by ear, feeling and instinct, not by rule."

In truth, there is no simple measure of how much grief is enough, or when it should stop.

I guess for myself I must ambiguously answer "yes" to both questions, having observed some of both kinds of behavior in myself over the past 5 years. While I know I didn't just shake it off, there have been times when I've cavalierly dismissed an anniversary or a birthday or the memory of a special time together because I wanted to find new mementoes for those times.

And yet there are still times that I can't shake it off. Just last month, revisiting Brown's Hotel in London after a 10 year absence, the memories were paralyzing.

If I'm truthful with myself, then, I guess I have to say that I'm a bit more stuck than I am dismissive.

So recently, I've begun to appreciate more and more the idea of what I've come to call "the value in adversity" as we work our way through grief.

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This began when I read some commentaries on Ecclesiastics written in 1982 by the late Ray C. Steadman, the long-time pastor of the Peninsula Baptist Church in Palo Alto. I was easily able to identify with the “grief wisdom” of the Searcher, as the voice of the book is often called, and who Steadman says was King Solomon.

In Chapter 7 there is a series of proverbs that list the good things that can happen in affliction. Verse 2 says:

*It is better to go to the house of mourning
than to go to the house of feasting;
for this is the end of all men,
and the living will lay it to heart.*

-Eccl 7:2 RSV

That is, says Steadman, when you are confronted with death or loss you are no longer dealing with side issues, you are dealing at last with realities. Death and loss lead to realism. Though they will bring sorrow, grief and mourning; you set aside the shallow, ephemeral aspects of life and start to deal with the facts.

When you hear who won or lost yesterday's “big game” six months, a year or even longer after a major personal loss it is hardly important, and it's tempting to unfairly put down those not suffering who can still find it so.

Secondly, the Searcher says, sorrow, paradoxically, can lead to gladness. Verse 3 says:

*Sorrow is better than laughter,
for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad.*

-Eccl 7:3 RSV

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And not only to gladness, but also to knowledge. Here's verse 4:

*The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning;
but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.*

-Eccl 7:4 RSV

How can that be? How can sorrow, grief and pain lead to gladness and wisdom?

A recent book by Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister helps us understand. It's a short but powerful book called "Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope." In it she compares the struggles and hopes surrounding a major loss in her life to the story of Jacob wrestling with God as told in Genesis.

With our losses, we struggle, she says, against the furies. I'm sure many of you recognize these: the furies of change, of isolation, of darkness, of fear, of powerlessness, of vulnerability, of exhaustion, and of scarring.

While these struggles sometimes seem insurmountable, we can, Sister Joan assures us, emerge from them with a set of gifts: gifts of conversion, of detachment, of faith, of courage, of surrender, of limitations, of endurance, of transformation, and—perhaps most important—the gift of hope.

She describes her book as, "an anatomy of struggle and an account of the way hope grows in us, despite our moments of darkness, regardless of our regular bouts of depression. It is an invitation to look again at the struggles of life in order that we might remember how to recognize new life in our souls the next time our hearts turn again to clay."

I found it very helpful, particularly some of her comments about hope and despair:

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“Hope and despair are not opposites. They are cut from the very same cloth, made from the very same material, shaped from the very same circumstances. Every life finds itself forced to choose one from the other, one day at a time, once circumstance after another.

“The sunflower, that plant which in shadow turns its head relentlessly toward the sun, is the patron saint of those in despair.”

And this one:

“Despair colors the way we look at things, makes us suspicious of the future, makes us negative about the present. Most of all, despair leads us to ignore the very possibilities that could save us, or worse, leads us to want to hurt as we have been hurt ourselves.

“Hope, on the other hand, takes life on its own terms, knows that whatever happens God lives in it, and expects that, whatever it twists and turns; it will ultimately yield its good to those who live it continuously, to those who live it to the hilt.”

I was struck by how Sister Joan's book echoed another expression of “the value in adversity” idea; Sister Joyce Rupp's book “Praying Our Goodbyes,” the namesake of our service tonight. It's worth briefly revisiting some of what Sister Joyce has to say.

She suggests that partings—all the Goodbyes throughout our lives—are essential parts of how God has made life and that we need to incorporate these into our faith.

I think that's so insightful: all the Goodbyes throughout our lives—are essential parts of how God has made life and we need to incorporate these into our faith.

Goodbyes are both small and large: the kids going to school, going on a vacation, changing jobs, getting married, getting divorced, moving to a new community, a child going away to college or job, getting

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downsized, the prostate gland that was removed, going bankrupt or the last shovel of dirt on the grave.

It is important, she says, for us to recognize and process these goodbyes in ways that express our faith in God and our conviction that Jesus is with us in all our goodbyes.

Too often the reality of goodbyes are denied, or internalized in ways that are destructive to our relationships with God and each other—perhaps that's what happens to us when “just shake them off”—and she describes a process of recovering from our goodbyes where we can emerge on the other side of the hurt and once again integrate our inner and outer worlds. Yes, we still carry scars, as did our Resurrected Lord, but they are no longer festering scars, they are healed scars.

The first followers of Jesus, she notes, finally did let go and return to Jerusalem. In time they experienced a powerful healing which they characterized as the coming of the Holy Spirit upon them.

Metaphorically, that's what we've got to do to recover, let go and return to our own personal Jerusalems.

Our service began with “Prelude on Gibbons' ‘Lighten the Darkness.’” It echoes the fifth verse at the beginning of The Gospel of John which tells us, “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

In this Advent season, we remember that there is hope in light. The Advent candles we light each week symbolize Christ's approach and birth as the light of the world. For some of us, these candles of joy and hope may not be easy to light, this year. For some, our own Advent season may take much, much longer. But there is hope.

“Hope,” concludes Sister Joan, “is the last great gift to rise out of the grave of despair.”

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Soon, the days begin to get longer, and the light begins to grow, and the dark begins to recede. With the birth of Jesus, we find a light, a beacon in the darkness. God has not abandoned us in our time of darkness; God has heard our prayers and sent to earth a son.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, Master of both the light and the darkness, send your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas. We who have so much to do seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day. We who are anxious over many things look forward to your coming among us. We who are blessed in so many ways long for the complete joy of your kingdom. We whose hearts are heavy seek the joy of your presence. We are your people, walking in darkness, yet seeking the light. To you we say, "Come Lord Jesus!" Amen.

-Advent Prayer by Henri J.M. Nouwen

And now, I'd like to add a short postscript. As some of you know, the offering for the "Praying Our Goodbyes" service goes through the Anglican Communion's Compass Rose Society to support the AIDS ministry in the Diocese of the Highveld in the Province of South Africa. It is used to help purchase caskets for those who succumb to AIDS and cannot afford even the basics of a simple burial. Just last week, I received this email of thanks from Bishop Davis Beetge who heads the Diocese of the Highveld and I'd like to share it with you.

Dear Friends,

You all know of or have supported the HIV/AIDS work in this Diocese, some of you over many years, and I write to let you know how much I thought of you and gave thanks for you at a service this morning.

My service on this the 6th of December was in the Parish of St Andrew's Kwa-Thema in Springs some 20 kilometers from where I live in Benoni. The service had been planned to include the Sunday Eucharist, a Confirmation and AIDS day. In the congregation of some

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600 people there were 40 young people to be confirmed and about 5 adults. There were also a group of 40 children all with bright yellow T-shirts on, all orphans and all HIV positive.

During the service the Church was filled with candle-light as each one held a candle in prayer. And on the one hand there was the joy of those being confirmed and on the other the deep unbearable sadness of those orphans who delighted to be with us joining in the singing and rushing forward to receive a blessing from me after the distribution of Communion.

And as I gave them a blessing I was conscious of a different sort of communion - one which Christ has with the sick and with those who live on the edge of society. But for Christ what we call the edge is really the centre - the centre of his broken, sacred heart. I knew, as imperfect as my words of blessing were, that is where they were being held.

And the mystery of the cosmic Christ who holds together the whole of this creation became, for a moment, that much more visible. The tears I shed within and without were tears of joy, of sadness and of the mystery of that incarnate love of Christ.

Thank you for the support you have given this Diocese and for the prayers you continually offer up to us.

With my love and prayers,

+David

I want to thank all of you who have given so generously to this mission in the past and ask once again tonight for your continuing support.

December 2003

Live as Children of Light

May I speak in the name of one God who created us, who redeemed us, and who comforts us. Amen.

I have two texts tonight that inform my remarks. The first is the traditional opening prayer from the Christmas Eve Liturgy at King's College, Cambridge:

Let us also remember before God all those who rejoice with us, but upon another shore and in a greater light, that multitude which none can number, whose hope was in the Word made flesh: And let us pray that we may be counted among that communion of saints.

... and the second, a reading from the first letter of John:

God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in dark-ness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another.

-1 John 1:5

We pray our goodbyes tonight to those “we love but see no longer” or to those parts of our life that have now forever changed. And we do it at a dark time of the year when many of us find that we cannot celebrate the upcoming holidays with the hearty spirit that others do. For many of us, it will be another Blue Christmas.

In these words from 1st John, we hear that the way out of our darkness back to fellowship with the world is through the light of God. But we also learn another lesson: that we can easily deceive ourselves by saying that we are walking in this light when, if we were honest, we are not yet really doing so.

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How hard it is to find that light; how hard it is to really let go of our losses.

I continue my own personal search for light in the darkness of loss—for I still often wonder if I am “truly in the light” or if I am deceiving myself and “walking in darkness”.

Light in the darkness is a prominent motif and metaphor throughout the literature of our faith.

Genesis tells us that in the beginning, darkness was upon the face of the deep. Some equate this darkness with chaos, like the chaos we found early in our experiences of loss.

But then God said, *“Let there be light, and there was light. And God saw that the light was good.”*

This season of Advent is another example: During Advent, we wait for the Son of God who is called the “Light of The World.” And later in the liturgical year, at the Great Vigil of Easter, we echo this as we chant, “The Light of Christ” and then respond, “Thanks be to God.”

Psalm 18:28 says, *“For You will light my lamp; The LORD my God will enlighten my darkness.”*

In Isaiah 9:2-3 we read, *“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.”*

And John’s gospel says: *“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”*

I remember a question posed by Fr. Brad Karelius, formerly the rector of The Church of the Messiah in Santa Ana, in a homily he

Live as Children of Light

gave at an All Saints Day service when he was serving at St. Mary's in Laguna Beach.

Brad asked us to consider, "Who are the Saints of your life—the lights of your world?" He suggested that in understanding, thanksgiving and acceptance of the gifts they gave us, we can, from our darkness, recognize a brighter future for ourselves.

Brad is one among many Episcopal priests who over the years have turned me in the direction of God's light. He married my late wife Susan and me, and later counseled us.

Our rector here at Saint Michael & All Angels, Peter Haynes, is a second. He supported me and my children, Mike and Sara, through Susan's final days, gave her last rites and conducted the celebration of her life six years ago. Those of you here tonight who have experienced Peter's compassion at a time of loss will understand how grateful we are to him.

Another priest who's touched my life during these last six years is also a good friend of Peter's: Canon John Peterson, the former secretary general of the Anglican Communion. I vividly recall how in the midst of a small social gathering at a bishop's home in South Africa, John deftly slipped from his role as a church administrator leading a Compass Rose Society mission trip into that of a compassionate pastor.

We'd only met a few days before, but during a short conversation, he acknowledged my grief, and with a few more thoughtful words, helped me, again, move toward God's light.

In Jerusalem this past October, John led a group of us down the Via Dolorosa through the fourteen Stations of the Cross. At the 12th station, inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, he turned to me—knowingly, I believe—and asked me to read the prayers written for the station "Where Jesus Died on the Cross" from his book "A Walk in Jerusalem: Stations of the Cross." These said, in part,

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“Let us pray:

For all persons who have died, whomever they may be;
That they may know Jesus and share His risen and eternal life.”

And lastly on my list tonight of personal saints, is a priest I’ve never met but have always greatly admired: The Rev. John Danforth.

An Episcopal priest, a former U.S. Senator and until just recently our ambassador to the United Nations, Rev’d Danforth officiated at the funeral service for former President Ronald Reagan at the Washington National Cathedral this past June.

In his homily, Rev’d Danforth talked about darkness and light.

As if speaking directly, he said to those assembled, “You and I know the meaning of darkness. Darkness is real, and it can be terrifying. Sometimes it seems to be everywhere.”

But “Creating light in darkness is God’s work,” Danforth reminded us.

And in telling us what to do when we are surrounded by darkness, Danforth pointed to St. Paul’s answer in his letter to the Ephesians, where Paul said that we must, with God’s help, again become children of light.

Paul says:

*For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light.
Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light are found in
all that is good and right and true.*

-Ephesians 5:8-10

Paul is asking us to search deeply within ourselves and seek the strength to once again, as Jesus familiarly directs us in Matthew’s gospel,

Live as Children of Light

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works

-Matthew 5:16

It seems that with these instructions, St. Paul is asking us, as we do here tonight, to pray our goodbyes to our losses.

"Praying Our Goodbyes," the title of our service, is also the title of a book by Cervite Sister Joyce Rupp. In it she describes a faith-based approach to coping with the inevitable goodbyes that we all must face in our journey through life.

I'd like us to remember some of her words:

"We say goodbye," she writes with great insight, "to parents, spouses, children and friends, sometimes for just a day or a year, and sometimes until we meet them on the other side of this life.

"We leave familiar places and secure homes. We bid farewell to strong, healthy bodies, burden-free spirits or minds. We change teachers, schools, parishes and managers, sometimes spouses or religions.

"We change our ideas, our values, our self-image and our way of interpreting life's situations.

"We place parents in nursing homes, allow children to experience risk-taking and growth, say no to love relationships that would be inappropriate or possibly harmful to us or to others."

All of these, and many other situations that we face from time to time, involve some kind of painful leave-taking and create for us a "goodbye."

But in response to these, Sister Rupp offers us a message of hope.

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She wants us to learn how to approach our leave-takings spiritually, not just saying our goodbyes but “praying” our goodbyes, by growing in our relationship with a loving, comforting God who does not want us to suffer, a God who will be with us through our goodbyes and who will lead us to what she calls new “hellos.”

Here are a few lines from a prayer Sister Rupp wrote for someone trying to move on from loss:

*I give you praise, God of my journey,
for the power of love, the discovery of friends, the truth of
beauty...*

*I give you thanks, God of my journey
for all I have learned from the life of Jesus of how to say
goodbye...*

*I ask forgiveness, God of my journey
for holding too tightly
for refusing to be open to a new life
for fighting off the dying that's essential for growing
for insisting that I must be secure and serene...*

*I beg assistance, God of my journey
to accept that all of life is only on loan to me
to believe beyond this moment
to accept your courage when mine fails
to recognize the pilgrim part of my heart.*

Through prayers and meditations like this, we may at last be able to say to those who have left us, "Go, God be with you. I entrust you to God," And with this, we can, at last, let go and be free to move on. To finally and without deceiving ourselves “walk in the light” returning ourselves once again to fellowship with the world and with God.

That, I think, would be a perfect place to end this homily; a great place to say, "Amen."

But that would leave my thoughts about a Blue Christmas this year somewhat incomplete, so if you'll forgive an indulgence, I'd like to offer a second ending.

I want to return, for just a moment, to that list of priests who are among "the saints of my life" and say just a few words about another one—one, like Rev'd Danforth, that I have never met, and, sadly, never will.

When I was in London this summer, I went on a Sunday morning to visit St. George's Hanover Square, only a few blocks from my hotel. I didn't know much about this historic church: that for example, it was the church where, in his day, George Frederick Handel was a parishioner and often played the organ. It was simply the closest church.

Nor did I know, until later in the next week, that the rector of this church, Fr. John Slater, had died on the same day I had attended services there. Coincidentally, I learned this from Canon John Peterson at dinner the following Thursday, in a conversation following my answer to John's question, "Did you visit a church in London last Sunday?" It seems that John and his wife Kirsten and Father Slater were the closest of friends.

But the coincidence is just part of the story. On June 13th, Father Slater gave what was to be his final homily at St. George's Hanover Square.

The Bishop of London, in his sermon at Fr. Slater's funeral noted that, "It was courage and determination which brought him into this church the Sunday before he died to preach from his chair. ... He sat at the door and greeted the congregation. He went home and on Monday wrote two more sermons for delivery on ensuing Sundays. He died on the following Sunday, the festival of the Resurrection,

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having received the final anointing and while a friend was praying the Lord's Prayer."

In that final sermon which he had titled "The Heirs of the Kingdom", Fr. Slater said this:

"And so the resurrection is not only something that happened in history, it is something that we experience daily. There must be a resurrection in our own life. I don't have to tell you that there must also be a crucifixion. In a strange way, Christians expect to bear the cross— are even glad to bear it; but how many of us really know the joy of the resurrection and live in that joy day by day?"

Here was a man who knew that, "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all," and one who to the end, "walked in the light as he himself is in the light."

I would very much have liked to have known him. I know that he too would have helped me find the light of God.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, Master of both the light and the darkness, send your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas. We, who have so much to do, seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day. We who are anxious over many things look forward to your coming among us. We who are blessed in so many ways, long for the complete joy of your kingdom. We whose hearts are heavy seek the joy of your presence. We are your people, walking in darkness, yet seeking the light. To you we say, "Come Lord Jesus!" Amen.

-Advent Prayer by Henri J.M. Nouwen

December 2004

Persons of Sorrow Acquainted with Grief

Help us, Lord, to receive and understand your gospel, so that we may find light in this darkness, faith in our doubts, and comfort for one another in your saving words. Amen.

-The Promise of His Glory: Services and Prayers for The Season From All Saints To Candlemas: Church Publishing House and Mowbray, 1991

This year, the fifth year we've offered this worship service, we've scheduled "Praying Our Goodbyes" just one day short of "All Hollow's Eve"—better known to us here in the United States as Halloween.

The first day of November, a time in the northern hemisphere when nature itself has begun to die, is a traditional time to remember the spirits of the dead.

Halloween, quite disconnected from religious ceremony, is a vestige of early Celtic observations which defended against the coming dark with bonfires blazing into the night. According to the book "The Geography of Religion: Faith, Place, and Space" published by the National Geographic Society, Roman conquerors extended the holy day to two days, combining respect for the dead with a harvest festival in honor of Pomona, the goddess of fruits and trees.

But as Christians gained control in the British Isles, they reinterpreted the pagan holidays by calling November 1 All Saints Day, honoring the saints and martyrs of their religion, followed by All Souls Day, the commemoration of all faithful departed.

Similarly, people in Mexico and Central America observe the Day of the Dead, el Dia de los Muertos. Believing that at this time of the year the spirits of the dead return to their households, families set

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out lavish altars with candles, wreaths, flowers and an array of food prepared only for this holiday, especially pan de muertos.

In our parish, we will formally commemorate All Saints Day and All Souls Day next Sunday. We have moved “Praying Our Goodbyes” closer to these remembrances from its previous December date hoping, along with other more practical concerns about the holidays, to have it become part of a heightened intentional practice of how we deal with death and loss as a parish family. We also seek to offer continuing hope to those who have suffered a recent loss as they face, at the end of Advent, the possibility of a “Blue Christmas.”

To that end, tonight not only will we celebrate a Eucharist in remembrance of our losses suffered during the year, but we will read this year’s parish necrology, and following the service, conduct a short re-commemoration of the parish memorial garden—The Memorial Garden of The Good Shepherd—after its recent refurbishment. Refreshments will follow in Michael’s Room.

Another change that you’ve already noticed is that we’ve combined the “Praying our Goodbyes” worship service with the second program in our 2005 Friends of Music series using Gabriel Faure’s “Requiem” as the context of our liturgy, a fitting background for our worship tonight.

My text this evening comes from II Samuel:

And the king was much moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went thus he said, ‘O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! Would to God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!’

-II Samuel 18:33

The title of this worship service, “Praying Our Goodbyes,” is taken, from the title of a book by Cervite Sister Joyce Rupp. In it she de-

scribes a spiritual approach to coping with the inevitable goodbyes that we all must face in our journey through life.

It is these painful leave-takings and the profound personal grief that they engender, that we consider tonight.

In the year since our last “Praying Our Goodbyes” worship service, not only have many of us experienced highly personal and private losses, but also, it seems to me, we have all been exposed to an unprecedented number of more public losses: the tsunami last December, the death of Pope John Paul II, hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma, the death of our chief justice, the earthquakes in Pakistan, the loss of military and civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan, the death of Rosa Parks and this weekend, the bombing in India. These are just a few of the more visible losses we’ve experienced.

The grief these losses generate can be intense, even from afar.

For example, here’s a glimpse of contemporary grief from Iraq. These are captions from a series of photos in a news magazine following the collapse of what came to be called, “the pilgrim’s bridge” where over 600 people died.

“Iraqis searching Thursday for relatives missing, after a deadly stampede of pilgrims, scanned the collage of postmortem pictures ... praying that they would find a familiar face—and yet praying that they would not.”

A second:

“On Thursday, mosques ran short of wooden coffins. Gravediggers in the holy city of Najaf, a preferred burial site for Iraq’s Shiites, worked without breaks. Suppliers of traditional mourning tents were inundated with requests in Sadr City, the Shiite neighborhood in the capital where many of the victims lived. Every major street in the slum was dotted with tunnel-shaped tents, where mourners gath-

ered to pray, to listen to recordings of Koranic verses and to sip coffee.”

And a third:

“Grieving relatives scoured the capital for funeral supplies, at times taking their search to outlying cities. ‘We had to get a [tent cloth] from Baqubah,’ said an unemployed ironworker whose neighbor’s son died on the bridge. ‘We’re still waiting for it to arrive.’ ”

Recent reports like this and the ancient biblical description of King David agonizing over the loss of his estranged son in II Samuel give us notice that grief is a universal human phenomenon, one that, most likely, we will all experience many times throughout our lives.

As the late Episcopal priest Fr. John Claypool says in “Tracks of a Fellow Struggler: Living and Growing through Grief” his meditation on the death of his young daughter from cancer, “No one can live on this earth very long without being initiated into the fraternity of the bereaved.”

We are, he says, “persons of sorrow acquainted with grief.”

C.S Lewis is well known for noting in “A Grief Observed” that,

“No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear,” but in a less well known quote from this journal of the time immediately following his wife Joy’s death, he went on to report on grief’s pervasiveness:

“Part of every misery is, so to speak, the misery’s shadow or reflection: the fact that you don’t merely suffer but have to keep on thinking about the fact that you suffer. I not only live each endless day in grief, but live each day thinking about living each day in grief.”

In today’s vernacular, for many of us, I’m sure: “Been there, done that.”

Persons of Sorrow Acquainted with Grief

The Bible deals extensively with grief. These verses from Psalm 88 and Lamentations describe it well:

*O LORD, my God, my Savior,
by day and night I cry to you.
Let my prayer enter into your presence;
incline your ear to my lamentation.
For I am full of trouble; *
my life is at the brink of the grave.
I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;
I have become like one who has no strength;*

You have laid me in the depths of the Pit,
in dark places, and in the abyss.
Your anger weighs upon me heavily,
and all your great waves overwhelm me.

*My friend and my neighbor you have put away from me,
and darkness is my only companion.
We hear of grief's self-centeredness in Lamentations 1 and its highly
individualized affect in Genesis 37:
First from Lamentations:
Is this nothing to you, all you who pass by?
Look and see!
Is there any pain like mine,
which was dealt out to me,
which the Lord made [me] suffer
on the day of His burning anger?*

-Lamentations 1 1:12

And then from Genesis when Joseph is taken to Egypt:

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Then Jacob tore his clothes, put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted and said, "No I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.

-Genesis 37: 34-36

And we hear grief's poignancy in John 11:15 that shortest of verses after the death of Lazarus:

Jesus wept.

Many of you have experienced these complex feelings, and it seems, everyone must, like Jacob, find their own unique way to grieve.

In their book titled "On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss" by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler, published following Kubler-Ross's death in August 2004, the authors note,

"Your loss and the grief that accompanies it are very personal, different from anyone else's. Others may share the experience of these losses. They may try to console you in the only way they know. But your loss stands alone in its meaning to you, in its painful uniqueness."

How then, should we deal with our grief? And how can we help others deal with theirs?

American Public Radio has a most worthwhile weekly program called "Speaking of Faith" hosted by a woman named Christa Tippett. It covers many aspect of contemporary religion. Recently she interviewed Doctor Rachael Naomi Remen, a physician at UC San Francisco who has been working with the grieving process for many years.

On that program Dr. Remen offered some fresh insights into managing loss and grief:

“The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet. This sort of denial is no small matter. The way we deal with loss shapes our capacity to be present to life more than anything else. The way we protect ourselves from loss may be the way in which we distance ourselves from life. We burn out, not because we don't care, but because we don't grieve. We burn out because we have allowed our hearts to become so filled with loss that we have no room left to care.”

Answering one of Christa's questions Dr. Remen said,

“No one is comfortable with loss. Being that we're a technological culture ... our first response to loss is to try and fix it. When we are in the presence of a loss that cannot be fixed, which is a great many losses, we feel helpless and uncomfortable and we have a tendency to run away, either emotionally or actually distance ourselves.”

Her therapeutic approach to grief is simple but powerful. Describing a project where she trains medical students to help with grieving families, Dr. Remen reported,

“We teach them the power of their presence, of just being there and listening and witnessing another person and caring about another person's loss, letting it matter. ... [we ask them] to remember a story of loss from their own lives—a time when things didn't go their way, when they were disappointed, when they lost a dream or a relationship or even a family member, a death.”

And she continued,

“They spend six hours in small groups talking about their loss. And the group has one instruction: Listen generously. [At the end] we make a big list.

"What are all the things that helped?

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'Listened to me for as long as I needed to talk.' 'Talked to me in the same way after my loss as they did before my loss.' 'Sat with me.' 'Touched me.' 'Brought me food.'

"What were the things that didn't help?"

'Gave me advice without knowing the full story.' 'Made me feel that the loss was my fault.'

"So," Dr. Remen says,

"We gather up the wisdom about what helps loss to heal from a group of about a hundred students and faculty, and it's all very simple stuff.

"And the only instruction is: listen generously."

She added,

"Most people try to hold on to the thing that is no longer part of their lives, and they stop themselves in their lives in that way. I have come to see loss as a stage in a process. It's not the bottom line. It's not the end of the story... . This is a starting place, but over time things evolve and change. At the very least, people who have lost a great deal can recognize that they are not victims, they are survivors.

"[And through this] most people haven't even noticed their strength. They're completely focused on their pain."

As Christians, we know that God's comfort can and will be a strength in our times of grief.

In John 14:18 Jesus says, "I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you."

And we learn very early in our Christian education from the Sermon on the Mount that,

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

-Matthew 5:4

We can gain strength from Christ.

“Grief gives us an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice, the reality of sin and the broken state of our world. We lament and wail but we also have hope in Christ and in a new beginning. These emotions live together in a Christian’s heart.”

Peggy Eastman, who wrote this in an essay in *The Living Church* magazine in July 2004, went on to say,

“It is hard to discern God’s hand in premature snuffing out of productive lives. The Church can’t answer “why” questions, just as God did not answer Job’s question when he cried out to Him for succor. But what the Church can do is offer hope—the promise that Christ will defeat the darkness of intruder grief, even when the mourner’s heart is pounded by the blunt trauma of death. The Church shines the light of Jesus into what can seem to the griever as terminal illness.”

Listen to another story from “Speaking of Faith.” This time Christa’s guest is Marianne Pearl who she introduces this way:

“My guest today is Marianne Pearl who was married to *The Wall Street Journal* correspondent Daniel Pearl who was kidnapped and murdered by Islamic extremists four months after 9/11. He was targeted in part because he was Jewish. Today you’ll hear Marianne Pearl, a Buddhist, on making sense of her husband’s murder and her spiritual battle on what she calls the front lines of the war on terror.”

As she concludes this spellbinding interview, Marianne Pearl talks about the expiation of her grief.

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“There is something I must do before the baby is born,” she begins. “I have to face what Danny faced. I have to confront the truth, because it is like an enemy: If you turn your face from it, then you are crushed by it.

“On May 25, two days before the baby is due, I take the phone off the hook, lie down alone, and imagine everything that happened to Danny. That doesn't take a great act of imagination ... by this point I have a lot of details. But I force myself to see it all. And I make myself think about what Danny thought, and to know when he was most afraid.

“For two days I live through this. They are the craziest days of my life, but I have to do this, and I have to do it alone. When it is over, I know nothing can happen anymore that I don't have the courage to fight within.”

Who of us would have the strength to endure such an agonizing confrontation with their grief?

Almost as if it was a summary of Marianne Pearl's experience, the Anglican theologian, N.T. Wright offers us a most striking description of grief and remembrance:

“Grief could almost be defined as the form love takes when the object of loss has been removed; it is love embracing empty spaces; love kissing this air and feeling the pain of that nothingness.

“But,” he adds,

“There is no reason at all why love should discontinue the practice of holding the beloved in prayer before God.”

N. T. Wright: “For All The Saints? Remembering the Christian Departed”, page 74.

The late Roman Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen echoes this:

“As we grow older we have more and more people to remember, people who have died before us. It is very important to remember those who have loved us and those we have loved. Remembering them means letting their spirits inspire us in our daily lives. They can become part of our spiritual communities and gently help us as we make decisions on our journeys. Parents, spouses, children and friends can become true spiritual companions after they die. Sometimes they can become even more intimate to us after death than when they were with us in life.

“Remembering the dead is choosing their ongoing companionship.”

Henri Nouwen: “Bread for the Journey”, August 29.

In “Praying Our Goodbyes,” Sister Rupp offers us this prayer:

I give you praise, God of my journey,
for the power of love, the discovery of friends, and the truth
of beauty...
I give you thanks, God of my journey
for all I have learned from the life of Jesus of how to say
goodbye...
I ask forgiveness, God of my journey
for holding too tightly
for refusing to be open to a new life
for fighting off the dying that’s essential for growing
for insisting that I must be secure and serene...
I beg assistance, God of my journey
to accept that all of life is only on loan to me
to believe beyond this moment
to accept your courage when mine fails
to recognize the pilgrim part of my heart ...

Through prayers like this, we may at last be able to say to those who have left us, as Marianne seems to have said to Danny, “Go, God be with you. I entrust you to God,” And with this, we can, at last, let go

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and be free to move on, returning ourselves once again to fellowship with the world.

November 2005

Peace Plans

Help us, Lord, to receive and understand your gospel, so that we may find light in this darkness, faith in our doubts, and comfort for one another in your saving words. Amen.

-The Promise of His Glory: Services and Prayers for The Season From All Saints To Candlemas: Church Publishing House and Mowbray, 1991

For the second year, we are holding this Praying Our Goodbyes service close to All Saint and All Souls Day rather than on its previous mid-December date hoping, along with other more practical concerns about the holidays, to have it become part of a heightened intentional practice of how we deal with death and loss as a parish family.

Last year following the service, we took another step in this intentionality by re-dedicating our refurbished memorial garden, The Garden of the Good Shepherd, hoping that it would become more visible as a resource for the parish.

At the same time, we continue to offer this worship service to serve its original purpose: to provide hope to those who have suffered a recent loss of someone or something that has given their lives meaning and value as they face, at the end of the upcoming Advent season, the possibility of a “Blue Christmas”, one that will exclude them from the joy that most share at this time of year.

Once again this year we’ve combined the “Praying our Goodbyes” worship service with the second program in our 2006/2007 Friends of Music “First Sundays at 5” series as we hear tonight choral music of Puccini, Brahms, Schubert and Rutter performed by our parish choir and guest soloists under the direction of our minister of music, Tim Getz. We thank them all for joining us in this ministry.

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Last year, the Praying Our Goodbyes offering was dedicated to the victims of hurricane Katrina who had lost so much. This year we will return to previous practice and dedicate the offering to the AIDS ministry at St. Dunstan's Cathedral in Johannesburg where it will help fund the purchase of simple wooden caskets for AIDS victims whose families cannot afford them.

My text tonight is from the book of Jeremiah:

I know the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord, plans for peace, not disaster, reserving a future full of hope for you.

-Jeremiah 29:11

As I began to prepare this homily, I thought a lot about a coincidence that I discovered only this summer, one that, although I didn't know it at the time, eventually led me to join St. Mike's and then to participate in the "Praying Our Goodbyes" ministry.

It's about my wife Susan's death, and I had to ask myself if I should (or indeed if I wanted to), once again get in touch with and share with you some of what happened during those days and nights eight and a half years ago, a time that is now somewhat murky and musty with age, but a time that I will never completely forget.

I am somewhat reluctant, and yet because this recently revealed confluence of events joins my loss to the mysteries of our faith, I'd like to ask you to come along with me in your mind's eye for a few minutes to a well-known place in our local community where we can begin to pray our goodbyes together this year.

Let me explain:

On June 2nd, 1998, the day before Sue died at Hoag Hospital in Newport Beach, I had had what Peter once referred to in a sermon

as a “God spotting experience”, an event that I first reported here several years ago.

I truly believe that I saw God our Father up in the corner of her room in intensive care, and I bargained with him like Moses did, and I argued with him like Job did and I wrestled with him like Jacob did over why he was taking this lovely young woman away from us.

Later, I realized that he was really not there to take her, but had come to share our suffering: to comfort my family and me as we faced the inevitable.

Our parish learned from Peter’s homily here on his 60th birthday in July that the second person of the Trinity was also at Hoag that spring.

Peter told us that while he was recovering at Hoag from a near fatal infection during Lent and Holy week of 1998, that he had a prayerful declaration of mutual love with Jesus, the son of the God that I had so recently struggled with in the same hospital.

As Peter talked that Sunday, I realized that this must have been just a month or so before Susan died and just before I met him.

And at the end, Sue, the children and I all experienced at Hoag the grace of the Holy Spirit through a priest I had just met, so recently recovered from his own life threatening illness and fresh from his meeting with Jesus, as he gently led all four of us together through the end of Sue’s pilgrimage here on earth and the celebration of her life.

In recalling and reliving these three coincidental events, I find that in a most unusual and mysterious way, the three persons of the Trinity have, long after my loss, helped bring me faith, gratitude and humility, helping to push away the residual pain, anger and self-pity that I still experience from time to time.

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This may be what the English New Testament scholar Nicholas King means, in part, in his recent translation of the Beatitudes when he offers “Congratulations to those who are mourning” instead of the more traditional “Blessed are they...” version, hinting, perhaps, that we should welcome loss for the insights and new directions that it will surely bring us once the pain has subsided.

I found a similar sense of faith, gratitude, humility and new direction earlier this year as I re-read “Praying Our Goodbyes,” the book by Cervite Sister Joyce Rupp that is the namesake of this service.

Sister Rupp wants us to learn how to approach our losses and leave-takings spiritually, not just “saying” our goodbyes but “praying” them, by growing in our relationship with a loving, comforting God who does not want us to suffer, a God who will be with us through all our goodbyes and who will lead us to what she calls new “hellos”.

I think that this time through the book, I really “got it”, as they say, after several earlier, somewhat superficial readings hurriedly looking for quick summaries of her narrative, like the one I just gave you, that I could incorporate into my reflections for this service over the past five years.

Not that these summaries don’t serve us well, they certainly do, but, as I re-read “Praying Our Goodbyes” it seems I had missed a few things along the way.

For instance, this from her Introduction:

“The word goodbye—originally ‘God be with ye’ or ‘Go with God’—was recognition that God was a significant part of the going. When you dreaded or feared the journey, there was strength in remembering that the One who gave and cherished life would be there to protect and console. Goodbye was a blessing of love, proclaiming the belief that if God went with you, you would never be alone...To the traveler it meant: ‘We cannot keep you from this journey. We hurt

deeply...you have made your home in our heart. Yet we know your leaving is essential to your growth. So go, go with God..."

So it must be, as we pray our goodbyes tonight to what we've lost.

And this:

She writes," Do we ever get used to saying goodbye? Or should we? I think not. Saying goodbye helps us experience the depth of our human condition. It leads us to a much deeper understanding of what it means to live in its mystery and its wholeness. We ought not be afraid of the partings that life asks of us. Nor ought we hold back in giving ourselves to love, to the wonderful growth opportunities of investing ourselves in people and events."

This is much harder. It means letting go and moving on, and we're encouraged to use our suffering creatively to find a resurrection, to ..."peer inside our own tombs of unfinishedness or incompleteness [to] discover... resiliency, vitality, fidelity, love and endurance."

"Congratulations to those who are mourning."

John 12:24 says, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

1 Peter leads us to the possibility of purification through suffering and inner transformation that Sister Rupp calls "creative suffering." It says:

"Even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith —being more precious than gold, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."

-1 Peter (1:6-7)

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A transformation like this can be a model for others who see us being wiser and perhaps more tender as a result of experiencing a traumatic goodbye and moving on to a new Hello through the strength of the risen Jesus.

“Congratulations to those who are mourning.”

A second new insight I learned from my re-reading of “Praying Our Goodbyes” is Sister Rupp’s concept that we are all pilgrims on a life-long pilgrimage of the heart: her belief that we are all on a relentless, never-ending journey homeward as we search for a deep center of peace while we live in the present, dealing with our aching spirit as we face loss and brokenness throughout our lives.

How does our pilgrim’s heart carry us through the difficult times of our lives? First, with the knowledge that our short lives are not ours, but are on loan—a gift of love that we must be thankful for and treat responsibly; second, with the courage to take risks that lead to growth, third, with the ability to cope with the demons we meet along the way and fourth, by recognizing the often disguised messengers from God who encourage us and guide us on our journey.

For Sister Rupp, the Exodus story of the Israelites journey from captivity to freedom is a model of the homeward journey of our pilgrim heart—and the faithful, caring presence of God with those who traveled through the wilderness.

“We all have an Egypt that needs a goodbye”, she says in a pithy one-liner that for me sums up a lot about our lives.

And she makes two other points worth noting about the Exodus.

First, that the Israelites journey was not the most direct:

“When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer, for God thought, ‘If the people face war, they may change their minds and

return to Egypt'. So, God led the people by the roundabout way through the wilderness to the Red Sea." (Exodus: 13:17)

Detours, she reminds us, often happen on our journeys from Good-bye to Hello.

And second, that God constantly reassures the Israelites of his strengthening and protective presence on their journey:

"I shall be with you ... I have visited you. ...

I will free you of the burden. ...

I will release you from slavery. ...

I will adopt you as my own people and I will be your God" (Exodus 3:12, 16; 6:6-7)

A final point that I discovered on re-reading "Praying Our Goodbyes" was what Sister Rupp has to say about loss and prayer.

She notes that grief has a way of plundering our prayer life leaving us feeling empty and immobile. At the time we need most to experience the compassion of God, we very often feel a distance in that relation-ship; the feeling of presence is gone and it may take time for it to come back.

When loss and grief are weighing on our hearts reminding us that "Yahweh kept vigil to bring them out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus 12-42) can be comforting even if we seem estranged from God.

Saying some short verses of scripture can also be helpful:

I have loved you with an everlasting love.

-Jeremiah 31:3

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Let not let your hearts be troubled.

-John 14:1

At these difficult times, we need to remember that God understands us and accepts us in our sadness which, along with loss, is a part of the human condition.

As to just how to pray our goodbyes Sister Rupp gives us several steps to follow: first we recognize and name the loss we have experienced, next, we reflect about it, giving the hurt of the loss our full attention, and finally, find a way to ritualize it.

In reflecting on it, we need not be “too nice” with God. We need to let God hear our anger and confusion, our frustrations and our disorientations—he knows them anyway—and our wishes that things would change or that things were different.

In closing, I’d like to take a few minutes and use Sister Rupp’s model to pray our goodbyes together using a short meditation she wrote in which we pray and reflect about our losses and ask for the trust that God will see us through them. Then, as we move on to our Eucharist of Remembrance, we will find there the comfort of its ritual for our goodbyes tonight.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Let us pray:

God of mystery, we turn our hearts to you. We come before you in need of peace, grateful for the mystery of life and ever keenly aware of your promises of guidance and protection. We want to place our trust in you but our hearts grows fearful and anxious. We forget so easily that you will be with us in all that we experience. Teach us to

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be patient with the transformation of our lives and to be open to the changes which we are now going through.

...and please listen to this reflection:

God says to us, "Look at the geese of the sky: they neither worry nor are anxious about the winter warnings of their lives, for they know within their deepest selves that their journey will take them to a place of shelter, of comfort, of nourishment, a place where winter harshness cannot reach them. See how they fly, winging homeward with sureness, with trust in their hearts' instincts. If these geese, who have not the faith and grace of human hearts, can follow the mystery and secrets of their deepest selves, cannot you, my loved and chosen ones, you whom I care for as my very own, cannot you be in touch with the mysteries of your own hearts? Cannot you trust in me to guide you on your journey of life? For I have promised to give you rest in seasons of tiredness, comfort in seasons of sorrow, peace in seasons of distress, strength in seasons of great weakness. Trust in me. Do not be afraid. I am with you and I will be your peace."

And from the Gospel of John:

Peace I bequeath to you, my own peace I give to you, a peace the world cannot give, this is my gift to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.

-John 14:27

Now. Place your hands on your lap, palms up. Open them, ready to give and receive from God. Sit quietly for several minutes in this posture of openness and trust. Recognize your loss, reflect on it and pray for the gift of trust in God as you go through the experience of loss.

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Let us pray:

God, in whom we trust, there is a part of us that is dying and a part of us that is coming to life. We want to have open hands to you and our lives, but it is such a struggle to do so. Remind us often of the peace which you extend to us. We thank you for your beloved son who suffered and gave us an example of trusting in you. Renew us day by day. Encourage us so that we may always be faithful to your call deep within our hearts. We open ourselves to the mystery of life and to your love. Amen

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Death's Gift

Help us, Lord, to receive and understand your gospel, so that we may find light in this darkness, faith in our doubts, and comfort for one another in your saving words. Amen.

-The Promise of His Glory: Services and Prayers for The Season From All Saints To Candlemas: Church Publishing House and Mowbray, 1991

Welcome to the 2007 Praying Our Goodbyes service here at Saint Michael & All Angels Episcopal Church in Corona del Mar.

Once again we gather here close to All Soul's Day and to an approaching holiday season too often filled with difficult memories, to pray and meditate about the losses in our lives.

For some, these will be raw, recent losses; for others, more distant ones; but for all there is still that gnawing feeling that something, no matter how far removed it is, is still missing.

"Grief", says the writer Joan Didion in her memoir of her husband's death, "The Year of Magical Thinking", "turns out to be a place none of us know until we get there," adding that, "nor can we know ahead of the fact... the unending absence that follows, the void, the very opposite of meaning, the relentless succession of moments during which we will confront the experience of meaninglessness itself."

As we pray our goodbyes again tonight, we look to the life-giving mystery of the Holy Eucharist to help us regain that lost meaning.

Once again our service is shared with the Saint Michael's Friends of Music "First Sunday at Five" November program and we thank Tim Getz and his wonderful musicians for their continuing participation and support.

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As always, Tim's selection of music for the service is most appropriate: Purcell's "Funeral Music for Queen Mary" and William Byrd's "O quam Gloriosum."

Our offering from this service will again go through the Anglican Communion's Compass Rose Society to the Aids Project at St. Dunstan's Cathedral in Johannesburg. There, they use these funds to purchase inexpensive coffins for AIDS victims whose families cannot afford them.

And I'd like to remind you that our parish is very fortunate to have a beautiful memorial garden—the Garden of the Good Shepherd—which is located behind the wall on your left as you walk out to the parking lot from the church. There's a description of the garden in the back of your service leaflet. To date, there are 75 memorials there. If you'd like to visit the garden tonight, candles will indicate the way.

My text for this evening is taken from the third chapter of the Book of Wisdom:

*"But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God,
and no torment will ever touch them.
In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died,
and their departure was thought to be a disaster,
and their going from us to be their destruction;
but they are at peace.
Those who trust in him will understand truth,
and the faithful will abide with him in love,
because grace and mercy are upon his holy ones,
and he watches over his elect."*

-Wisdom 3, 1-3, 9

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We even named our new dog—she was fittingly, perhaps, a spirited, golden haired sheltie—“Lady Diana”.

For short, we’d call her just “Diana” or, when we were being silly, “Di-Di”.

That’s how much the outwardly glamorous life of the Princess of Wales had suffused our household during her brief fling with royalty: from the gala wedding in St. Paul’s Cathedral that we watched on a rented television at a friend’s condo in Sun Valley, to the sad sight of Prince William and Prince Harry, heads bowed, walking behind her coffin on its way to the altar in Westminster Abbey following her death in the Alma auto-tunnel near the Seine.

That was August of 1997—10 years ago.

Little did I know then, as we watched the funeral and wept together, that Susan, my own dear princess, would herself be dead in nine months.

I’m not sure quite how I will mark this upcoming milestone anniversary even though it seems that memorial celebrations are quite common these days and take many different forms.

Certainly there won’t be best-selling books and TV specials about Sue as there have been about Diana. While my wife was quite remarkable in many notable ways, only a relative few will know this.

Nor will I issue a commemorative coin as the British Virgin Islands and the Falklands have done for Diana’s tenth, nor even organize a conference as St. Vincent College in Pennsylvania did in recognition of Mother Teresa’s tenth this past September.

Certainly I won’t put on a rally as some did ten years on to remember Jill Philips, an animal rights activist who some think was murdered at an anti-veal protest in Great Britain.

Sue loved her horses, but I'm certain that she'd find a rally just a bit over the top.

It goes on and on: Last July 15 a special ballet was presented in Milan to honor the late fashion designer Gianni Versace on the 10th anniversary of his death. NPR prominently noted the murder of rapper Tupak Shakur 10 years after his death and there were widely broadcast ceremonies in Israel to mark the 10 years since the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. And then there was, of course, that vigil in Memphis last August—Elvis died 30 years ago.

Writing this past September, Ruth Gledhill, the religion correspondent for London's newspaper The Times noted:

“Memorial services have become one of the churches' biggest growth areas. For public figures the services get bigger and more frequent, with death anniversaries being marked as well as the original death. But memorial services are increasingly following and sometimes even supplanting funerals for private individuals as well.”

Gledhill quoted one Church of England expert who speculated on the reason for this trend: “they have taken the place of funerals in many cases. When memorial services first started, they were for the great and the good. Now everybody has one, and why not?”

He said that the past few years had seen a 'desertion' of the funeral format. 'People do not like funerals,' he noted, 'I think because of *momento mori*. People do not like to be that near death. A memorial service, however, does concentrate tremendously on a person's life. That has become more acceptable than dwelling on the fact of death.'

Sister Joyce Rupp, the author of “Praying our Goodbyes”, the book from which we take the name of tonight's service, asks us in this regard:

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“Do we ever get used to saying goodbye? Or should we? Saying goodbye helps us experience the depth of our human condition. It leads us to a much deeper understanding of what it means to live in its mystery and its wholeness.”

This perhaps, is one of the best reasons that we should, every so often, recall and memorialize our losses and I think that this service offers us a way to do that here in our own parish.

But while recalling publicly the life and the contributions of someone we deem exceptional may have value in providing closure or a belated, less emotional recognition, I personally still prefer more private tributes.

Our Jewish friends, for example, have a brief, sober service called Yizkor—literally “May God Remember”—a ten minute prayer for the dead in which the loved ones to be remembered are named. It’s a personal time to reflect on one’s relationship to a loved one. Some congregations even have a separate Yizkor service which must be a bit like this one, but in their own worship tradition.

I suspect that my ten year memorial to Susan on June 3, 2008 will involve simply a visit to her grave along with a few family members and close friends, her favorite yellow rose and some readings that I’ve put together from the “The Book of Common Prayer” and the Bible.

I think I’ll start my remembrance by reading a passage from the fourth chapter of the Song of Solomon*. It begins;

How beautiful you are my love, how very beautiful...”

-Song of Solomon 4:1

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For the past six years we have been holding these “Praying Our Goodbyes” services which both commemorate All Soul’s Day and anticipate the upcoming holiday season when, as Elvis himself reminded us, there can be a “Blue Christmas without You”.

Many of us have found Sister Rupp’s book especially helpful in dealing with loss. In it, she describes how we can approach our losses and all our leave-takings spiritually, not just “saying” goodbye but “praying” goodbye, thus growing in our relationship with a loving, comforting God who does not want us to suffer.

This is a God who will be with us through all of our goodbyes and who will lead us to what she calls “new hellos” in the persistent cycle that we encounter throughout our lives—the many “goodbye—hello” pairings that punctuate our experience—everything from the death of a loved one and its subsequent resolution in a new life to the loss of a job and then finding a new one or sending the kids off to college and reclaiming some personal time for ourselves.

Here are several of Sister Rupp’s observations from her book which I find worthy of our rehearsal:

“The word goodbye—originally ‘God be with ye’ or ‘Go with God’ — was a recognition that God was a significant part of the going. When you dreaded or feared the journey, there was strength in remembering that the One who gave and cherished life would be there to protect and console. Goodbye was a blessing of love, proclaiming the belief that if God went with you, you would never be alone. To the traveler it meant: ‘We cannot keep you from this journey. We hurt deeply...you have made your home in our heart. Yet we know your leaving is essential to your growth. So go, go with God.’ ”

But she also warns us that,

“Grief has a way of plundering our prayer life leaving us feeling empty and immobile. At the time we need most to experience the compassion of God, we very often feel a distance in that relationship;

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the feeling of presence is gone and it may take time for it to come back.”

At these difficult times, we need to remember that God understands us and accepts us in our sadness which, along with loss, is a part of the human condition.

She also notes that,

“We ought not be afraid of the partings that life asks of us. Nor ought we hold back in giving ourselves to love, to the wonderful growth opportunities of investing ourselves in people and events.”

This is much harder, but it is really the heart of her message.

It means letting go and moving on, and she encourages us to use our suffering creatively to "...peer inside our own tombs of unfinishedness or incompleteness [to] discover... resiliency, vitality, fidelity, love and endurance.”

Joan Didion commented on this, too, in “A Year of Magical Thinking.” She said:

“I also know that if we are to live ourselves, there comes a point we must relinquish the dead, let them go, keep them dead.

“Let them become the photograph on the table.

“Let them become the name on the trust accounts.”

But, she concluded,

“Knowing this does not make it any easier to let go of him.” She’s right about that.

We are, I think, during this vulnerable time of bereavement, always in danger of what the narrator in Andrew Holleran’s newest novel “Grief” tells us: “Some people cling to grief because it’s all they have

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left of the person who's gone. As long as you have that, you're not alone you have them."

Where can we look for help with this? The roots of our faith, not surprisingly, can offer some relief.

In his well-regarded study of death and bereavement, "Death's Gift: Chapters on Resurrection and Bereavement", originally published in 1978 and recently re-released in the UK in a new edition, Nicholas Peter Harvey, a Roman Catholic lay theologian, offers some thoughts on bereavement drawing parallels between what happened to the disciples after the death of Jesus and to bereavement as a personal growth opportunity.

Presenting what was a truly startling insight to me, Harvey reminds us that the very foundation of the Church is based on the testimony of a group of bereaved disciples.

The truth that Christ is the manifestation of God is witnessed by a group of people who, like all of us who have grieved, are still alone, hapless, confused and fearful following the death of a loved one.

Their bereavement showed them the way forward into the meaning and power of Jesus as Savior.

The idea that Jesus' death set humankind free, as reflected in the disciples' experiences after the crucifixion, can find resonance in our own bereavements. And our own lives, when touched by the resurrection, can yield a new, richer relationship to the person who has died.

In Jesus' resurrection appearances, Thomas touched the risen Lord, Mary Magdalene clung to him and some ate and drank with him. After this, they understood that the person they had loved was still alive in a timeless reality.

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This somewhat mystical quote from Harvey's friend Bishop Stephen Verney captures what he means:

"Things which belong in time and things which belong outside of time, are trying to express themselves through the same events. They happen in clock time, but they are also timeless.

Bishop Verney finds echoes of the resurrection appearances in the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased. We too, he believes, can come alive and be with the deceased now in that same reality beyond time. The resurrection as a metaphor opens wider perspectives for the bereaved today as it did for the disciples in the early life of the church.

"When someone you love has died, the barrier between 'in time' and 'outside of time' grows very thin and a new pattern of events is set free to happen around us," Verney wrote.

Maybe you too have found those special "thin places," between "in time" and "outside of time", the spots where Celtic spirituality tells us that this world and the realm of the spirit come close together.

And maybe you too, like the disciples, have "crossed over" once or twice and found some companionship and comfort "outside of time."

In sum, Harvey and Verney contend that the death of a loved one is at its root a growing point, with all the pain and struggle which that suggests.

It is a genuinely critical, creative moment in a person's development, not just something to be gotten over—not just a stoical return to normalcy.

He stresses that it is an opportunity for growth, not a guaranteed process, which is best assured by having the bereaved, as Joan

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Didion alluded to, let the deceased die, freeing them from the danger of imprisonment in a moment in the past.

And echoing the narrator in "Grief", Harvey offers what for me is a profound conclusion for us to consider about all this: the successful bereavement process involves letting go of what it is in ourselves that seeks to continue to cling to the beloved as a focus of false security.

He calls the distresses involved in being freed from this type of seeking "growing pains". Ten years on, I still have the occasional growing pain, as I suspect you do to, wherever you are in your journey through grief.

May our resurrected Lord lead you through these pains and help you find many glorious new hellos.

Trust in Him. For "Grace and mercy are on his holy ones, and he watches over his elect."

Let us pray:

O god, who brought us to birth,
And in whose arms we die,
In our grief and shock,
Contain and comfort us,
Embrace us with your love,
Give us hope in our confusion
And grace to let go into new life,
Through Jesus Christ our resurrected Lord.
Amen

-Janet Morley, 1951

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*From "The Song of Solomon":
How beautiful you are, my love,
 how very beautiful!
Your eyes are doves
 behind your veil.
Your hair is like a flock of goats,
 moving down the slopes of Gilead.
Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes
 that have come up from the washing,
all of which bear twins,
 and not one among them is bereaved.
Your lips are like a crimson thread,
 and your mouth is lovely.
Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate
 behind your veil.
Your neck is like the tower of David,
 built in courses;
on it hang a thousand bucklers,
 all of them shields of warriors.
Your two breasts are like two fawns,
 twins of a gazelle,
 that feed among the lilies.
Until the day breathes
 and the shadows flee,
I will hasten to the mountain of myrrh
 and the hill of frankincense.
You are altogether beautiful, my love;
 there is no flaw in you.
Come with me from Lebanon, my bride;
 come with me from Lebanon.
Depart from the peak of Amana,
 from the peak of Senir and Hermon,
from the dens of lions,
 from the mountains of leopards.

November 2007

Easter Christians in a Good Friday World

Help us, Lord, to receive and understand your gospel, so that we may find light in this darkness, faith in our doubts, and comfort for one another in your saving words. Amen.

-The Promise of His Glory: Services and Prayers for The Season From All Saints To Candlemas: Church Publishing House and Mowbray, 1991

A warm welcome to all and especially to those who are not parishioners here at Saint Michael & All Angels Corona del Mar and who came to enjoy the very special form of Anglican worship that the Rev'd Norm Freeman and his jazz group bring us.

This is also the second of seven concerts this year in the Saint Michael's Friends of Music "First Sunday at Five" series that our Minister of Music Tim Getz has arranged for us, and if you enjoy it, I hope that you will come back for the others in the months that follow.

Conductor Leonard Slatkin said at a concert in London on the Saturday following 9/11, "We use music tonight to express all the emotions we feel", and then conducted Samuel Barber's familiar and haunting "Adagio for Strings" as a tribute to the dead and injured in the United States.

Many grieving people find comfort in music. Sometimes, a certain song can remind us of the person who died and provides memories. Or a lyric may sum up what we are feeling better than any words we try to verbalize. For some, music can be a form of meditation or relaxation as we try to deal with our grief. And for others, music is a form of escape from the pain.

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Memories are important in the healing process, and if music can help capture moments of better times or images of those we love, then we should cherish the words and melodies, as I expect many of you are doing tonight.

A bit of background about the service: Our worship community here at Saint Michael & All Angels has recognized that difficult memories and associations will often diminish the joy of the approaching holiday season for those still dealing with the pain of loss.

And so we now offer this service each year at this time so that we can pray and meditate about the losses in our lives as we anticipate through Advent the birth of our Lord and Savior.

For some, these are raw, recent losses; for others, more distant ones; but for all there is still that gnawing feeling that something, no matter how far removed it is, is still missing.

One of the characters in Robert Wilson's novel "A Small Death in Lisbon" said it this way:

"Loss is like shrapnel wound ...where the piece of metal's got stuck in a place where the surgeons daren't go, so they decide to leave it. It's painful at first, horribly painful, so that you wonder whether you can live with it. But then the body grows around it until it doesn't hurt anymore. Not like it used to. But every now and again there are these twinges when you're not ready for them and you realize it's still there and it's always going to be there. It's a part of you. A still, hard point inside."

In recent years, we've scheduled this remembrance service on or close to All Souls Day, The Feast of All Faithful Departed(1),the day in the our Church when we come together to remember all those who have gone before us.

All Souls is traditionally celebrated on November 2 (November 3rd if the 2nd falls on a Sunday as it does this year), and on this day we

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remember all those who in some way contributed to the life we live and the world we live in.

The name of this service, "Praying Our Goodbyes", comes from a book by a Cervite Sister, Joyce Rupp. In it she describes a spiritual approach to coping with the inevitable goodbyes that we all must face in our journey through life.

"We say goodbye," she writes, "to parents, spouses, children and friends, sometimes for just a day or a year, and sometimes until we meet them on the other side of this life.

"We leave familiar places and secure homes. We bid farewell to strong, healthy bodies, burden-free spirits or minds. We change teachers, schools, parishes and managers, sometimes spouses or religions.

"We place parents in nursing homes, allow children to experience risk-taking and growth, say no to love relationships that would be inappropriate or possibly harmful to us or to others."

These and many other similar situations that we all must face from time to time involve some kind of painful leave-taking and create for us a "goodbye". It is all these goodbyes and the profound personal grief that they engender, that we consider tonight.

Many of us have found Sister Rupp's book especially valuable in dealing with our grief.

She describes how through prayer, mediation and spiritual exercise we cannot just say our goodbyes but pray them, and grow in our relationship with a loving, comforting God who does not want us to suffer and who will lead us to what Sr. Rupp calls the "new hellos" of personal resurrection and growth.

Our offering from this service will again go through the Anglican Communion's Compass Rose Society to the Aids Project at St. Dun-

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stan's Cathedral in Johannesburg. There, they use these funds to purchase inexpensive coffins for AIDS victims whose families cannot afford them.

Offering baskets are at the rear of the sanctuary.

With this year's offering we remember the life and ministry of our friend, Anglican Bishop of the Highveld the Rt. Rev. David Beetge, who founded the AIDS program at St. Dunstan's, who died this past September.

I'd like to close tonight, by recalling for you this year's Easter message by our rector in our March parish newsletter, For the Love of Mike. It contains a wonderful story that offers us the strength we need tonight.

Peter wrote:

"Easter is God's promise that He is always with us, ready to roll back the stone from the doors of tombs so that we can live hopefully in a hopeless world. God is always with us.

"Last Easter, I told the story of going up Pacific View Drive with a parishioner to visit the grave of her beloved. While there we saw a woman kneeling before two gravestones and heard her praying aloud.

"When we, and she, finished, that woman got up, looked at us, and volunteered: 'I come here all the time. You see, my husband and son are buried here. I spend time with God, and, in a sense, with them, too. I don't want ever to forget them or them to forget me. I know that they are with the Lord. I read in the Bible that 'as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.' (1 Cor. 15:22). And I believe that to be true. When I see them: my Lord and my God, and my husband, and my son ...we sure won't be strangers.

Easter Christians in a Good Friday World

“As we walked away, my friend, our parishioner, said to me, ‘I’m sorry, Peter, but that’s the best sermon I have ever heard!’

“Anyone who goes to the cemetery to visit their child,” Peter continued, “like Mary in the Easter Gospel and that wonderful woman at Pacific View, lives in a ‘Good Friday world’.

“But just up our street, that woman allowed God to break through her grief and comfort her.

“She knows that Christ is risen. She lives as an Easter Christian in a Good Friday world. She understands that there is Life beyond our body-boundness. She shares the love of her husband and son across that boundary and looks forward to "the stone" being rolled away one more time.”

“This Easter,” wrote Peter and I add to that, “this night,” “I hope that God will plant in your heart remembrance of the empty tomb and the hope of the open tomb, and that God will help you to live as an Easter Christian, surprised by joy.

Thank you so much for that gift, Peter, to those of us who pray our goodbyes tonight.

The communion hymn this evening will be Duke Ellington's “Come Sunday.” Its lyrics are my closing prayer.

Let us pray:

Lord, dear Lord above, God almighty,
God of love, Please look down and see my people through.

I believe that God put sun and moon up in the sky.
I don't mind the gray skies 'cause they're just clouds passing
by.

Heaven is a goodness time. A brighter light on high.

LIVE AS CHILDREN OF LIGHT

Do unto others as you would have them do to you, and have
a brighter by and by.

Lord, dear Lord above, God almighty,
God of love, Please look down and see my people through.

I believe God is now, was then and always will be.
With God's blessing we can make it through eternity.

Lord, dear Lord above, God almighty,
God of love, Please look down and see my people through.
Amen.

(1) The Feast of All Faithful Departed (also known as All Souls Day,
November 2) From Episcopal News Service Online 10/29/2004:

“In the New Testament, the word 'saints' is used to describe the
entire membership of the Christian community, and in the Collect for
All Saints' Day the word 'elect' is used in a similar sense. From very
early times, however, the word 'saint' came to be applied primarily
to persons of heroic sanctity, whose deeds were recalled with
gratitude by later generations.

“Beginning in the 10th century, it became customary to set aside
another day—as a sort of extension of All Saints—on which the
Church remembered that vast body of the faithful who, though no
less members of the company of the redeemed, are unknown in the
wider fellowship of the Church. It was also a day for particular
remembrance of family members and friends

“Though the observance of the day was abolished at the Refor-
mation because of abuses connected with Masses for the dead, a
renewed understanding of its meaning has led to a widespread
acceptance of this commemoration among Anglicans, and to its
inclusion as an optional observance on the calendar of the Episcopal
Church.”

November 2008

Life Has Changed, Not Ended

Help us, Lord, to receive and understand your gospel, so that we may find light in this darkness, faith in our doubts, and comfort for one another in your saving words. Amen.

-The Promise of His Glory: Services and Prayers for The Season From All Saints To Candlemas: Church Publishing House and Mowbray, 1991

W

elcome to our 2009 Praying Our Goodbyes service.

First, a bit of background for those who may be attending for the first time: Our worship community here at the Episcopal Church of Saint Michael & All Angels Corona del Mar has recognized that difficult memories and associations often diminish the joy of the approaching holiday season for those still dealing with the pain of loss.

We hope that this service will offer some comfort.

The name of the service, "Praying Our Goodbyes", comes from a book of the same name written by a Cervite Sister, Joyce Rupp. In it she describes a spiritual approach to coping with the inevitable goodbyes that we all must face in our journey through life.

"We say goodbye," she writes, "to parents, spouses, children and friends, sometimes for just a day or a year, and sometimes until we meet them on the other side of this life.

"We leave familiar places and secure homes. We bid farewell to strong, healthy bodies, burden-free spirits or minds.... We place parents in nursing homes, allow our children to experience risk-taking and growth...."

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It is all these goodbyes and the profound personal grief that they can result in, that we meditate about tonight and during the upcoming Advent season when we anticipate the birth of our Lord and Savior.

In recent years, we've added another dimension to this worship, scheduling the service on the Sunday closest to All Souls Day, The Feast of All Faithful Departed, the day in our Church when we come together to remember all those who have gone before us and who in some way have contributed to the life we live and the world we live in.

And once again we share our service with the Saint Michael's Friends of Music "First Sunday at Four" program, and we thank our minister of music Tim Getz for bringing us today a talented jazz trio led by Jeff Jarvis, the director of jazz studies at Cal State Long Beach.

A couple of notes: our offering from this service will again go through the Anglican Communion's Compass Rose Society to the Aids Project at St. Dunstan's Cathedral in Johannesburg. It will help fund the purchase of coffins for AIDS victims whose families cannot afford them. Offering baskets are in the back of the church.

And I'd like to remind you that our parish is very fortunate to have a beautiful memorial garden—the Garden of the Good Shepherd—which is located behind the wall on your left as you walk out to the parking lot from the church—candles light the way to it tonight if you'd like to visit following the service. To date, there are 83 memorials there—three have been added since this service last year. There's more information about the garden in your service leaflet or you can contact our rector, The Very Rev'd Canon Peter Haynes.

A few days after the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in Anaheim this past July, I was sitting in my kitchen with CSPAN playing unattended in the background. I was thumbing through the convention's commemorative edition of the Episcopal Church's "Book of

Common Prayer”, which I had purchased at our rector’s suggestion, and in one of those “there are no coincidences” moments, the re-broadcast of Walter Cronkite’s Celebration of Life from St. Bartholomew’s Episcopal Church’s in New York City began airing.

Walter’s send-off was, in the Episcopal Church’s jargon, “The Burial of the Dead: Rite One”, but a slightly modified service, since several eulogies—the custom is generally just one—were interspersed throughout the liturgy.

Nevertheless, I was easily able to follow along in my new Prayer Book with its 1979 presentation of an ancient ritual which has its antecedents in 4th century Christian burial rites.

I’ve been thinking a lot about these ancient liturgies recently as I’ve attended several Celebrations of Life here in our own parish this year.

It’s how we Episcopalians formally “Pray our Goodbyes” to our beloveds and it tells us a lot about our theology and our faith.

It’s unfortunate though, but most understandable, that as we follow the liturgy during the celebration of our beloveds lives, we are so often occupied with our own grief or the grief of family and friends that for many of us, these rituals offer more comfort in their predictable familiarity and the solace of our favorite Scripture passages or a favorite hymn than in their deeper meanings.

I know that I’m certainly guilty of that.

So this evening, I’d like to focus on a few passages from our rituals for the dead, and listen to the words a bit more closely. They say a lot about what we believe happens to our departed beloveds, our relationship with them and our grief.

Much of this is taken from a book by The Rev’d David DeSilva, formerly an Episcopalian and now a Methodist pastor and seminary

professor, titled “Sacramental Life: Spiritual Formation Through the ‘Book of Common Prayer’.”

As I’ve studied his chapters about burial rites and grief, I’ve found a great deal of comfort and I hope you will too in this summary of his thoughts.

DeSilva first asks us to remember that while parted from us, our beloveds are not lost:

He begins with this quote from the preface for the commemoration of the dead on page 382 in the “Book of Common Prayer”:

“For your faithful people, Oh Lord, life is changed, not ended”, and he notes that the burial liturgy gives us several comforting assurances about the existence of the departed.

First, our departed loved ones continue to be loved and cared for— “If I climb up to heaven, thou art there, if I go down to hell, thou art there also”, says Psalm 139. We seek a safe arrival for them on the “other side” as we ask Jesus to “receive our loved one into the arms of thy mercy” (BCP 481) and to “acknowledge a sheep of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming” (BCP 465) helping us to recognize that the departed has passed securely into His arms.

Our second assurance of their care is that the faithful find a place of belonging after death as Paul, in the familiar suggested reading from Romans Chapter 8, tells us that death will not cut us off from God’s love for us in Christ.

Just as we belong to God throughout our lives, we belong to God in death. As Revelations 7 says, “the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd.”

And a third source of assurances is Paul’s affirmation of the resurrection of the body in the suggested reading from I Corinthians 15

where he uses the metaphor of planting seeds in the expectation of new life:

“It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body,” Paul says and, DeSilva notes, we reflect this expectation in the liturgical act of committal of the body to its resting place when we say:

“He, who raised Jesus Christ from the dead, will also give new life to our mortal bodies through his indwelling spirit.” (BCP 591)

Not only are our loved ones cared for but, DeSilva points out, we are also assured that our relationship with them lives on. The burial liturgy frequently mentions the “communion of saints” where God, “has knit together the elect in one fellowship (BCP 480).”

This is the way God helps us keep connected with our loved ones who precede us as we look to the time when, (quote) “by God’s call, we are reunited with those who have gone before us (BCP 493).”

As to our grief, the liturgy also helps us manage it when it threatens to extinguish all hope, when tears have become our “food day and night”.

The psalms in the service remind us to raise our eyes to God and to cry out to him for help.

*“Yea, the darkness is no darkness with thee,
but the night is as clear as the day,
the darkness and light to thee are both alike. ”*

says Psalm 139 (BCP 475).

And as he does with many of his actions, Jesus models grief for us in the story of Lazarus as he weeps and stands beside us in our sorrow.

In the Prayers of the People in Burial Rite II, we pray:

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“Lord, you consoled Martha and Mary in their distress; draw near to us who mourn and dry the tears of those who weep. You wept at the grave of Lazarus, your friend; comfort us in our sorrow. You raised the dead to life, give to [the departed] eternal life (BCP 497).”

In a chapter titled “Growing through Grief” DeSilva echoes Sister Rupp’s notion in “Praying Our Goodbyes” of turning our goodbyes into “hellos”—the idea that a new “hello” will always follow “good-bye” in some form if we allow it.

There is or can be, Sister Rupp says, new life, although it will be different from the life we knew before. The resurrection and the promises of God are too strong to have it any other way.

As he concludes, DeSilva calls our attention to the emphasis put on the departed saints by the prayers offered in the services for burial, calling on us to reflect on their lives and to embody their examples in our own as we go forward.

Imitating what we observed in our loved ones that was noble, generous, uplifting and helpful allows us to add their strength to our own, and helps us to say hello—to become more than we could be on our own— as we walk on the other side of grief.

The Eucharist at the burial service is offered to the bereaved as a “comfort in affliction (BCP 482)”, and we offer it here tonight in that same spirit. It connects us beyond death as a “foretaste of [the] heavenly banquet” in a place where “there is no death, neither sorrow or nor crying, but the fullness of joy with all your saints.”

Let us now all join in it together as one as we pray our goodbyes this night.

Amen.

November 2009

Looking Back

Eternal God, let the memory of those who have gone before us be held and cherished eternally in your presence, that no one who belongs to you may be forgotten. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

(Service background deleted. See Note to readers in “Acknowledgements.”).

Let me begin my thoughts tonight with this verse from the Gospel of John:

“So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice.”

– John 16:22

Tonight, I meditate with you about anniversaries: often they are times to celebrate, but in our case as mourners, more likely they are times to pause and remember. We’ll do some of that tonight.

Here’s what I said in 2003 at this service on the 5th anniversary of the of my wife Susan’s death:

“As I mark the 5th anniversary of her death, I find myself asking two sets of questions:

“First, do a lot of us today skip mourning our losses? If so what have we missed and what’s the ultimate cost? And have I skipped it?

“Or on the other hand, do some of us grieve too long, remaining immobilized and unable to move on? And am I stuck?”

LIVE AS CHILDREN OF LIGHT

You can judge for yourself where I am now after 13 years by reading this chronological collection of the homilies I've given here over the past ten years called "Live as Children of Light" [now updated through 2013 in this volume.]

I put these together to commemorate the 10th anniversary of this service which we note tonight, and our rector has generously written an introduction to it. It's available in the back of the church, so please pick one up on your way out. And if you'd like to donate \$5 to the parish to help with our ministry in Africa that would be nice, but it's not necessary. The books are there for the taking.

My daughter Sara did the editing and proofreading on the book, so after she'd finished, I asked her for her comments.

Reading all 10 of the homilies together, she was able to get a perspective that I didn't have.

She recalled her study of the late Elizabeth Kübler Ross's pioneering work "On Death and Dying" and used the familiar "stages of grief model" as a lens through which to observe my grief journey over the years as I described it in these homilies.

In later work, Kübler-Ross suggested that mourning families went through the same stages as dying patients, and in 2005 she published a follow-up to "On Death and Dying" called "On Grief and Grieving", explaining how the stages apply to mourning.

While her theory is still taken by many as the definitive account of how we grieve, some academics have come to criticize it as based more on anecdotal observation than empirical evidence.

And toward the end of her own life, Kubler Ross realized, according to Meghan O'Rourke writing in the February 10th 2010 New Yorker magazine, that the stage theory had, over time, grown into a "restrictive prescription for grief."

Looking Back

Though Kübler-Ross captured the range of emotions that mourners experience, new research suggests that grief and mourning don't follow a checklist; they're complicated and untidy processes, less like a progression of stages and more like an ongoing process—sometimes one that never fully ends.

As I've talked with many of you over the years, this seems to me the way it happens, especially for those of us who when sitting alone – just reading or having a snack – will all of a sudden break into tears and sob for a while.

Sara's observation of her father's grief seems to bear this out as she finds examples of the stages of grief -- denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance – throughout my homilies, but not in the neat and ordered fashion that Kübler-Ross would have it.

Here are Sara's overall conclusions:

“Like many who have dealt with grief, this author (strange to hear your child refer to you in the third person, but that's what a good liberal arts education will get you these days) seems to be moving through the classic stages of grief.

“Because he lost his loved one several years before he began these sermons, we are not privy to his denial. However, the anger is clearly stated in his ‘God Spotting’ experience where he repeatedly and sharply asks ‘why?’ (I had reported in one of the homilies that I saw God in Sue's hospital room as she lay dying and Peter gave her last rites, and I berated God for taking her away.)

“Depression is also evident in the first few years, Sara goes on. There is talk of tears and disabling grief, but that seems to wane as years pass. Finally, the acceptance is woven in and out of each sermon and gains strength as time goes on. He is able to see ‘light’ and ‘hope’ through understanding and faith.

LIVE AS CHILDREN OF LIGHT

“The ultimate goal of returning to personal growth and retaining fond memories of our loved ones becomes a prevalent message in his later sermons, but he takes several years to reach that destination. However, at the end of the book, the author is clearly living as a ‘child of light.’”

She provides many examples to support her case and here are a few that illustrate my journey and that may well apply to yours:

From 2001, the first homily titled, “Praying Our Goodbyes”: Sara says, “There are tears, misery and vacant stares. These are clearly the words of someone engulfed by their grief...” and she quotes a verse from a poem I wrote:

On the third Christmas without you
The tears are still much more than snowflakes:
Melting memories mingling with a persistent present
Where misery’s still covered with a thin veneer of purpose
that turns too often to a vacant stare.

And further on she notes, “The author has made some strides, but experiences can still produce disabling grief. The depression is still quite pervasive and can rear its ugly head almost upon command.”

Speaking about 9/11 in December 2001 I had said, “Most of the gains I had made during the year dealing with my own personal losses were instantly crushed under the weight of falling debris and suffocated in the stench from Ground Zero. My grief became again, briefly, disabling.”

In 2002, Sara commented, “This year there is more focus around ‘moving on’ – as if it were a possibility. The anger that was so present at his initial God Spotting experience is not as raw – it has now been transformed into a learning experience. An experience the author can even take ‘comfort’ from...that’s a big change from disabling grief.

Looking Back

I commented in that homily:

“Our service tonight is designed to help us recognize this special pain and to look to God for the courage and strength to “pray our good-byes” to these losses and move our lives beyond them.”

And:

“So I hope that this personal reminiscence of a “God Spotting” that I had now some four years ago will help open your hearts to the possibility of spotting God in your own life, particularly at this most difficult season for you.”

December, 2003: “The author,” says Sara, “is still ‘stuck’ in grief on occasion, but these instances are fewer and farther between. The grief is harder to produce on command or be produced by circumstance. The author is even beginning to see more ‘hope’ in the light of the future and ‘value in adversity:’ clearly a sign that he is moving out of depression and towards acceptance.

My thoughts here were these:

“So recently, I’ve begun to appreciate more and more the idea of what I’ve come to call “the value in adversity” as we work our way through grief.”

And:

“Soon, the days begin to get longer, and the light begins to grow, and the dark begins to recede. With the birth of Jesus, we find a light, a beacon in the darkness. God has not abandoned us in our time of darkness; God has heard our prayers and sent to earth a son.”

In 2004, I gave the homily that titles the book, “Live as Children of Light”. Sara says that it, “gives an indication that the author is able to see beyond the darkness – in fact the author is finally embracing the idea that there is something other than darkness. It discusses the

importance of moving toward the light to get beyond our grief. A few years ago there wasn't any indication of moving beyond grief; just being in it was overwhelming and engulfing.

"In other words," I said, "we must, in this, our bluest season, meditate and pray that we might now find the light that God is always offering us."

In November 2005: "The author is now starting to talk about strength and renewal. Gone are the prayers and thoughts focused solely on the disabling grief and crushing darkness. There is a sense that he is moving closer to that ultimate goal of acceptance by once again focusing on personal growth and renewed fellowship."

And in November 2006: "Memories of the loss are getting murky and foggy – a sign that the author is moving beyond the torture of raw grief. He wonders whether he wants to 'get in touch with' the loss again – clearly it is no longer at the surface. It's not at the tip of his tongue, lacing every thought he has. He experiences anger 'from time to time,' but it is residual pain, not disabling pain. There is finally a realization that this loss is part of his life journey.

Here I quoted Sister Rupp. She writes:

"Do we ever get used to saying goodbye? Or should we? I think not. Saying goodbye helps us experience the depth of our human condition. It leads us to a much deeper understanding of what it means to live in its mystery and its wholeness. We ought not to be afraid of the partings that life asks of us. Nor ought we hold back in giving ourselves to love, to the wonderful growth opportunities of investing ourselves in people and events."

"A transformation like this can be a model for others who see us being wiser and perhaps more tender as a result of experiencing a traumatic goodbye and moving on to a new 'Hello' through the strength of the risen Jesus."

Looking Back

November 2007: Sara says, “The title of this sermon is somewhat shocking: “Death’s Gift”. Would the author have dared to call it a ‘gift’ a few years ago? The loss will never be forgotten, but it is farther removed and he is able to find relief through his faith. The author also, amazingly, finds this loss to be an “opportunity for growth.” This is the first mention of this experience as an ‘opportunity’ – before it was about finding the light, moving on and dealing with the aftermath. But now there’s an opportunity - an opportunity to continue his own personal growth guided by the hope and light his faith has brought.”

November 2008: “Once again we are reminded that the author is in a different space than he was a few years ago. There are mentions of ‘joy’ and ‘gifts’ sprinkled throughout the text.”

Paraphrasing one of our rector’s sermons – one of my favorites -- I said here:

“This night, I hope that God will plant in your heart remembrance of the empty tomb and the hope of the open tomb, and that God will help you to live as an Easter Christian, surprised by joy, in a Good Friday world.”(See page 108.)

November 2009: Sara concludes her review, “Life has changed for this author, not ended. (Apparently, she read the prayer book, too. Note: page 349.) He now appears to be on the ‘other’ side of grief – strangely looking back on the experience as a journey meant for him. Part of acceptance is understanding that the loved one is gone yet we can find comfort in joyous memories of them. Being able to even face those memories presents a terrifying hurdle that this author has now cleared. Through the hope he’s found in his faith, he has become a ‘child of light.’”

Such is the optimism of a loving daughter.

However long or short your journey of loss, I pray that you will ultimately follow St. Paul’s direction: live as a child of light.

LIVE AS CHILDREN OF LIGHT

Let us pray:

Merciful God,
your Son is the resurrection and the life
of all the faithful;
raise us from the death of sin
to the life of righteousness
that at the last,
with all your faithful servants,
we may come to your eternal joy;
through our Saviour Jesus Christ
[who is alive with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit
one God, now and forever. Amen

Grace, Mercy and Peace be with us all.

November 2010

Emmaus Moments

Please pray with me:

Eternal God, let the memory of those who have gone before us be held and cherished eternally in your presence, that no one who belongs to you may be forgotten. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

In November of 2001 I gave my first “Praying Our Goodbyes” homily here at St. Michael & All Angels. I began by explaining the notion of a “Blue Christmas” and said,

“Many writers have told us how the pain of loss intensifies during the holiday season: the phenomenon often called a ‘Blue Christmas.’

“Experts say it’s because Christmas is our most important family holiday: often featuring reunions of loved ones filled with warm memories of happy times. The collision of [these] Christmas memories with a recent numbing loss can generate dark despair and disconsolate depression brought about by shock, fear, guilt and loneliness.

“Christmas 2001 will be especially ‘blue’ for many in our nation. We still grieve for an indescribable human tragedy, and also for the loss of our country’s innocence that only a few, who no one listened to, could imagine would ever happen.

“For me, September 11th created the ‘Blue Christmas Effect’ three months early.

“... Most of the gains I had made during the [previous] year dealing with my own personal losses were instantly crushed under the weight of falling debris and suffocated in the stench from Ground Zero. My grief became again, briefly, disabling.”

LIVE AS CHILDREN OF LIGHT

Let's begin tonight with a prayer written by former Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church Frank T. Griswold in memory of the 3,052 who lost their lives and for all those who lost loved ones on September 11, 2011; and now, more recently, for those lost in Norway:

Let us pray:

God the compassionate one, whose loving care extends to the entire world, we remember this day your children of many nations and many faiths whose lives were cut short by the fierce flames of anger and hatred. Console those who continue to suffer and grieve, and give them comfort and hope as they look to the future. Out of what we have endured, give us the grace to examine our relationships with those who perceive us as the enemy, and show our leaders the way to use our power to serve the good of all for the healing of the nations. This we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord who, in reconciling love, was lifted up from the earth that he might draw all things to himself. Amen.

(Service background deleted)

One of the highlights of our parish life so far this year was the pilgrimage to the Holy Land that 29 of us were fortunate enough to take in July.

We saw and heard wonderful things. Among the many notable places we visited during our two week adventure were the panoramic view of the local geography from Mount Moria where Moses first encountered the Promised Land, the Sea of Galilee near Jesus' hometown of Capernaum and an ancient synagogue there, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem overseen by three Christian faiths, the fourteen Stations of the Cross that we reverently walked on an early summer morning and finally, the ruins at the archeologically most likely of three possible sites of the village of Emmaus. In an outdoor chapel there, we held our final Eucharist with our rector presiding.

Emmaus Moments

I say finally, because for me our trip seemed carefully choreographed to bring us from a broad geographical and geological overview of the land where Jesus walked through the historical complexities of first century AD social, political and religious life to a startling end-point not unlike the one that two disciples experienced when they met a stranger as they walked disconsolately from Jerusalem to Emmaus just after the first Easter.

Many, including Sister Rupp in “Praying Our Goodbyes,” have noted the importance of this walk and some call later repetitions of what happened there “Emmaus Moments.”

The name comes from Luke 24:13-35. As the disciples go toward Emmaus, they are joined by a stranger, who explains how Scripture anticipated the crucifixion of Jesus. Inviting this stranger to dine with them when they reach their destination, they realize “in the breaking of bread” that he is Jesus himself.

Here’s how the familiar story concludes:

“As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.’ So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’ That same hour they got up and re-turned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!’ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.”

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Emmaus Moments, then, are accounts of times in people's lives when the God of Jesus Christ seemed to break through and be particularly close to them.

For me, our two weeks of education and fellowship was indeed an Emmaus Moment and reading the story from Luke at our Eucharist brought that home to me.

In "Praying Our Goodbyes," Sister Rupp describes four elements in our prayer life to help us let go; to help us move on from loss; and in this process, find Emmaus moments with Christ where His closeness offers comfort and direction to mediate our grieving.

These prayers begin, she says, when we recognize and name our hurt. For some, this means uncovering and facing up to a long-buried past.

That done, we need to take time to reflect about our loss, a counter-cultural process for most Westerners, she notes. Here we can, if we're honest about it, discover our deepest feeling and reconnect our lives to God. During these reflections, we need to let God hear our cry and our distress; our anger, confusion, frustrations and disorientation.

And as we reflect, we need to listen, for if we do, we will hear God's hopeful voice, which can take many healing forms: a line from scripture, a refrain from a song, a sound in the wind.

Sometimes we will walk away from this prayer time wondering if it was worth it. Sister Rupp asks for our patience and persistence and reminds of us Romans 8:26:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

Emmaus Moments

When we need it, God can come to pray in us in our dark and sad moments, she tells us.

We also bring to our prayers about our losses images which help connect our prayers to life experiences and movement where we bring our bodies to prayer as we connect our hurt to the God of healing.

We can, for example, see the necessary transitions and goodbyes of life in the image of birds going south for the winter or in the movements of the woman at the well (we visited the well in Nablus in July, by the way) as she hurries to tell the people of her inner healing and the end of her sinful life and even in small everyday movements such as sharing a meal with a friend as a love-bond with someone who nourishes us in our emptiness.

As you can see, Sister Rupp has a broad understanding of prayer. Watching the birds fly south and thinking about life transitions and sharing a meal with a friend who nourishes your emptiness opens up our conversations with God to include many fresh options.

And these connections, says sister Rupp, are Emmaus moments. We connect to God much like the two traveling to Emmaus connected with Jesus when their heart-ache on the road met with the image of the bread blessed and broken.

As the two walked along and talked with Jesus they did not know they were being healed. It was in the breaking of the bread that a reorientation of their lives took place. "Their eyes were opened," the story says, and they began to accept what their recent experiences at the cross meant to them. They regained the gift of hope and opened themselves to the healing which they needed.

In this reorientation, we connect our pain to the God of healing as we bring faith to our grief.

LIVE AS CHILDREN OF LIGHT

As we remember those we love but see no longer and receive the broken bread at the altar this evening, hold these words from the Book of Wisdom in your hearts:

But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seem to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace. For though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality. Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself. Those who trust in him will understand truth, and the faithful will abide with him in love, because grace and mercy are upon his holy ones, and he watches over his elect. Wisdom 3:1-5, 9

Hear this, and YOUR eyes will begin to open and Emmaus will begin to come into view.

Grace, Mercy and Peace be with us all.

November 2011

Dancing with a Limp

Please pray with me:

Eternal God, let the memory of those who have gone before us be held and cherished eternally in your presence, that no one who belongs to you may be forgotten. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

(Service background deleted)

One day in late August, I was using the social networking site Facebook and who should pop up but our Senior Warden Lynn Headly to tell us, not to my surprise, that she “likes” the women’s clothing store Talbot’s. My immediate reaction was: “That was Sue’s favorite place.”

Susan, my wife of 22 years and step mom to my two children, has been dead now for 14 years.

Sociologist Nancy Berns recently published a book called “Closure” and when you hear that title, I’m sure you know exactly what she means. After all, that’s something that all of us dealing with significant losses in our lives are seeking, right?

She tells us, “When it comes to the end of a relationship, the loss of a loved one, or even a national tragedy, we are often told we need ‘closure.’ School children are told to find closure after a shooting. A nation seeks closure after 9/11. Mourners search for closure after a funeral, and family members want it following a homicide. ... People are told to find closure after their pets die.

“Closure is a new emotional state,” she adds, “one that people supposedly need to find in order to heal after a loss.”

But then she gives us pause by asking, “But do people really need closure? What is closure? Is it even possible to find closure after bad things happen? “

And why, she asks, has talk about closure become so popular? Noting that closure is now a central part of sales talks in the funeral, grief, relationship advice, and memorialization industries as well as a political argument for issues ranging from the death penalty to roadside memorials, her book provides a behind-the-scenes look at a new industry, and a new postmodern emotion .

So what is closure anyway? Berns’ research found that there is no agreed upon answer. Justice? Peace? Healing? Acceptance? Forgiveness? Moving on? Resolution? Answered questions? Revenge?

And how are you supposed to find this closure? Planting trees (I did that one)? Acquiring memorial tattoos? Forgiving murderers? Watching killers die? Talking to offenders? Writing letters? Burying wedding rings? Buying expensive pet urns? Committing suicide? ... Just a partial list.

Berns goes on to argue that talking about closure limits how we think about grief and fails to capture the experiences of many who grieve over death or other losses.

Some people, she notes, struggle to meet society’s expectations for closure when privately they resent the idea or, worse, they wonder whether something is wrong with them because they do not have closure.

I am one of those people.

I laughed out loud when I read her discussion about a team of psychiatrists who, in the currently topical debate about whether “complicated grief” should be a medical condition, surveyed people fourteen months after the loss of a close loved one.

Dancing with A Limp

They are suspected of having “complicated (that is, medically treatable) grief” if after this period they still experience such symptoms as “unbidden memories of the lost relationship, pangs of severe emotion, strong yearnings for the deceased, feeling alone or empty or loss of interest in activities.”

I laughed because fourteen YEARS after my wife died, I still experience all of these!

So, am I dysfunctional? Some, of course, would say so because of my many visible ticks, but as for my grief, is it possible that I am just taking a different route through grief than others do?

That there is no standard, normal way to grieve? That grief varies across cultures and changes over time? That complicated grief is normal grief?

I very much like this quote from former New York Times columnist and novelist Anna Quindlen

“Grief remains one of the few things that has the power to silence us. It is a whisper in the world and a clamor within. More than sex, more than faith, even more than its usher death, grief is un-spoken, publicly ignored except for those moments at the funeral that are over too quickly, or the conversations among the cognoscenti, those of us who recognize in one another a kindred chasm deep in the center of who we are.

“Maybe we do not speak of it because death will mark all of us, sooner or later. Or maybe it is un-spoken because grief is only the first part of it. After a time it becomes something less sharp but larger, too, a more enduring thing called loss.

“Perhaps that is why this is the least explored passage: because it has no end.

“The world loves closure, loves a thing that can, as they say, be gotten through. This is why it comes as a great surprise to find that loss is forever, that two decades after the event there are those occasions when something in you cries out at the continuous presence of an absence.

“‘An awful leisure,’ Emily Dickinson once called what the living have after death.”

Feeling this way puts me in the category of what Berns calls the closure “Myth Slayers.”

These are people who say four things:

First, closure is not possible because the pain never goes away completely.

Here she quotes from a psychiatrist who lost two adult sons six months apart:

“Like all who mourn, I learned an abiding hatred for the word ‘closure’ with its comforting implications that grief is a time limited process from which we will recover. The idea that I ... would no longer miss my children was obscene to me and I dismissed it.

“The process of mourning requires that we keep fresh the memories of our children. “

Another grieving author writes, “The love you have for your angel will never ‘close.’ And thus the pain will never ‘close.’ No, there is no ‘closure.’ There is just love.”

Second, closure is not good because it promises false hope. Many seeking and expecting to find it often fail, and in this failure find greater frustration and stress.

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Third, closure is not desired because we do not want to forget. "If closure means forgetting about my son," one parishioner told his pastor, "then I want nothing to do with that concept."

Finally, closure is not necessary in order to find hope and healing. Myth Slayers offer hope and encouragement through a different path by explaining that the pain of grief eases over time. This, however, is different from closure. Staying open to grief, they argue, as opposed to seeking closure, brings important experiences with it.

Grief counselor Amy Florian puts it this way:

"Eventually we realize we are taking the past, with all its pain and pleasure, into a new tomorrow. We never forget, and in fact we carry our beloved with us; he or she is forever a cherished part of who we are. We are changed-by the experience of having loved this person, by the knowledge of life's transience, and by grief itself. We become different and hopefully better, more compassionate, more appreciative, more tolerant people. We fully embrace life again, connecting, laughing and loving with a full heart."

And, tellingly, she closes, "...There is no point at which we will never cry again, although as time goes on the tears are bittersweet and less common."

Sister Rupp picks up this theme when she talks about "creative suffering":

She says it is what we do with our suffering that is important noting that Jesus spoke of suffering as a source of growth:

I assure you that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it can only be a single seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.

-John 12:24

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About this, Sofia Cavalletti, in her 1992 book “The Religious Potential of the Child” wrote,

"Life develops through a series of successive 'deaths,' which lead us to live always more fully, because in each death there is the seed of resurrection": an echo of Sister Rupp's paradigm of the “hello, goodbye, hello” cycles in our lives.

The resurrection is always a strong theme in “Praying our Good-byes”, and Sister Rupp goes on to say, “Suffering can be beneficial when it leads to some kind of ‘resurrection’ in us, when a clarity about life's purpose and direction becomes keener for us, when a stronger sense of compassion for others deepens in us. There is so much within us that needs to come to life.

Moments of suffering, times of goodbye can cause us to peer inside our own tombs ... and we can discover vast storehouses of resilience, vitality, faith love and endurance.”

In a recent blog posting titled “Why You May Never Heal” (edited slightly here for continuity and clarification) funeral director and sometime theologian Caleb Wilde offered these thoughts:

“In psychiatrist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross' famous (but now somewhat dated) model of the grief process for those who are dying, she listed five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and, finally, acceptance.

“In this process, Kübler-Ross assumed that the bereaved should be experiencing what Freud called “decathexis”, a removal of emotional energy from the deceased; a detachment.

“Freud suggested that during and after “decathexis” we will take those emotional energies and reinvest them into another object or person in a process called, not surprisingly, “recathexis.”

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“Essentially, we find other people to love ... and use them to fill the ‘love hole’ -- Wilde’s term -- left by the deceased.”

Both Freud and Kübler-Ross assume that the end of the grief process -- healing and acceptance -- is a form of detachment from the deceased.

Wilde thinks this is wrong.

He quotes the writer Anna Lamott,

“You will lose someone you can’t live without, and your heart will be badly broken, and the bad news is that you never completely get over the loss of your beloved. But this is also the good news. They live forever in your broken heart that doesn’t seal back up. And you come through. It’s like having a broken leg that never heals perfectly—that still hurts when the weather gets cold, but you learn to dance with a limp.”

Wilde goes on to say that the end of the grief process is not detachment and healing but adjustment. It’s adjusting to the fact that your loved one is no longer here to share life experiences with you. It’s adjusting to the loss of the future, but there’s never a detachment from the past.

We simply have on-going bonds with the deceased. They will forever be a part of us and instead of trying to “heal” and find “decathexis” -- likely the 19th Century definition of “closure” -- we must learn to adjust and dance with our limp.

Over time, he says, you will learn to adjust to the death of a loved one. A part of you has been lost and you will never find it again, so you must learn to live without it. But, don’t confuse your adjustment for healing. You may never heal.

Wilde concludes his post by quoting the writer of children’s books Jandy Nelson on the loss of her sister, Bailey:

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“My sister will die over and over again for the rest of my life. Grief is forever. It doesn’t go away; it becomes a part of you, step for step, breath for breath. I will never stop grieving Bailey because I will never stop loving her. That’s just how it is. Grief and love are conjoined; you don’t get one without the other. All I can do is love her, and love the world, emulate her by living with daring and spirit and joy.”

Maybe the reason we never heal, he says, is because our love never dies.

Let us pray:

Remember, O Lord,
all souls in trial, sorrow and distress.
Be a helper to the helpless,
bring home the wanderer
and deliverer the captive.
Comfort the weak
and bind up the wounds of the afflicted
and let us dwell together in peace
as children of light;
and this we ask through Christ our Lord.
Rowland Williams (1902-93)

Grace, Mercy and Peace be with us all.

November 2012

Death in the Family

Please pray with me:

Eternal God, let the memory of those who have gone before us be held and cherished eternally in your presence, that no one who belongs to you may be forgotten. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Let me welcome you to our 2013 “Praying Our Goodbyes” service.

(Service background deleted)

Recently, psychiatrist Mark Epstein wrote in an article in the New York Times titled “The Trauma of Being Alive”, “The first day of school and the first day in an assisted-living facility are remarkably similar,” and he added, “Separation and loss touch everyone.”

And he pointed out that, “While we are accustomed to thinking of trauma as the inevitable result of a major cataclysm, daily life is filled with endless little traumas. Things break. People hurt our feelings. Ticks carry Lyme disease. Pets die. Friends get sick and even die.”

Tonight we pray about these goodbyes, losses and traumas and the profound personal grief that they can bring us.

We share our service again with the Saint Michael’s Friends of Music “First Sunday at Four” program and we thank our minister of music Bob Grant for bringing us today’s program.

My thoughts for us tonight begin with a few verses from Psalm 90.

1. *Lord, you have been our refuge *from one generation to another.*

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2. *Before the mountains were brought forth, or the land and the earth were born, *
from age to age you are God.*
3. *You turn us back to the dust and say, *"Go back, O child of earth."*
4. *For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past * and like a watch in the night.*

Many of us who grieve for loved ones do so by visiting their graves. It's a long-standing tradition in our culture. But why do we go there? To remember? To meditate? To give thanks? Yes, all of these, but, perhaps for other things, too, I think, some of them that we're not really aware of.

Fourteen years ago, about a year after my wife Susan died, I published a pamphlet called "A Graveside Meditation." In the preface I said:

"I pray that this "Graveside Meditation" will lead you to a place in your heart where you can approach and examine your relationship with a loved one who has died.

"By using it often, I hope it will help you understand how you can best achieve God's purpose on earth without their physical presence but with their spiritual companionship."

I continued:

"I wrote this pamphlet because, when visiting my wife's grave, I have often felt the need to better discipline my thoughts and meditations toward the answers I'm searching for when I go there: What is the meaning of her loss? How is it changing me and my family? How can her loss bring me a better understanding of God in my world today? What was the role and importance of this relationship in my life? What will it be now? Both the structure and the content of this

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devotional have helped me filter out and deflect the emotions that can impede real insight into these questions.

“This meditation relies extensively on passages from the Bible and from the Pastoral Offices used at a Celebration of Life found in “The Book of Common Prayer”, a text that is used during worship in the Episcopal Church in the United States of America. We hear many of these passages read at funerals, but our attendant grief or condolence usually prevents a complete understanding of them.

“I have found that reading and studying them away from the context of those intensely sorrowful moments in the peace and quiet of a grave site can bring a continuing measure of comfort and solace and a departure point for reflection and remembrance.”

I’ve recently updated this pamphlet and copies are available at the back of the church.

One of the prayers that I’ve added to this edition is found on page 493 of the “Book of Common Prayer”:

O God of grace and glory, we remember before you this day our sister Susan [brother (sister) N.] We thank you for giving him/her to us, his/her family and friends, to know and to love as a companion on our earthly pilgrimage. In your boundless compassion, console us who mourn. Give us faith to see in death the gate of eternal life, so that in quiet confidence we may continue our course on earth, until, by your call, we are reunited with those who have gone before; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Our rector, Peter Haynes, tells me that this is one of his favorite prayers in the Burial Office. It certainly captures in just a few lines important elements of the theology of our faith.

LIVE AS CHILDREN OF LIGHT

I last heard this prayer on a sunny summer day this past June as I stood with my son Michael and Peter at Susan's grave in Pacific View Cemetery, just a few blocks up the hill from where we are this afternoon. Peter read this prayer for us once again. We were all surprised to note that fifteen years had passed so swiftly since the three of us stood there together with Susan's friends and family to pray our goodbyes to her.

As I stood there, I was taken again by what an amazing institution our Church is! It offers to anyone a continuity of support over the years, and from generation to generation, through a caring priest who is a pastor and a friend, a liturgy that provides the discipline of God's word and a calendar that takes us from anticipation to birth to death to resurrection to ascension as we go about our daily lives. And despite all its divisive worldly politics, there remains the refuge that the Psalm calls out -- from generation to generation. I am most grateful to be a part of it.

Before our visit to the cemetery, Mike and I attended the service of healing that St. Mikes hold each Wednesday. During the service we individually offer prayers of healing for loved ones in distress. Mike stood just to the right of me and offered a prayer for his step-father Brooke who shortly was, sadly, to enter hospice care and has since died.

I knew Brooke for over twenty years and greatly respected and admired him. He was a brilliant scholar and a highly-regarded professor of English and I will always be grateful to him for what he taught my children outside of the classroom.

Today, their loss is great.

It's terribly sad to watch your children begin a difficult, painful journey that you yourself have been on for fifteen years. But I know it has to be.

Death in the Family

As the Psalmist said, "You turn us back to the dust and say, *'Go back, O child of earth.'

We will all suffer death and before, we will all experience grief.

Sadly, death touched my children more than once this past summer. Their first cousins lost their father, who was divorced from my ex-wife's sister Sally, adding even more sorrow and pain in the family and raising the question for Sally and I, "How does the ex-spouse and parent respond when the divorced partner dies or loses their subsequent partner?" But that one's for another homily.

What will grief be like for this group of four cousins and their seven offspring? What is it like for you who grieve together here tonight?

A year ago at this service, I talked about how the popularity of looking for "closure" through various grieving activities is looking for a false hope, and described Nancy Kerns, in her book, "Closure" made the case for that.

Dr. Epstein offers a similar outlook from a psychiatrist's point of view:

"Mourning," he wrote, "... has no timetable. Grief is not the same for everyone. And it does not always go away. The closest one can find to a consensus about it among today's therapists is the conviction that the healthiest way to deal with trauma is to lean into it, rather than try to keep it at bay. The reflexive rush to normal is counterproductive. In the attempt to fit in, to be normal, the traumatized person (and this is most of us) feels estranged...

"The willingness to face traumas — be they large, small, primitive or fresh," Epstein says, "is the key to healing from them. They may never disappear in the way we think they should, but maybe they don't need to. Trauma is an ineradicable aspect of life. We are human as a result of it, not in spite of it."

Coincident with Dr. Epstein's piece, psychotherapist Ashley Davis Bush published "Grief Intelligence: A primer" in The Huffington Post a few weeks later. While I don't usually read the Post, I do collect references to grief from the internet, and this one duly showed up in an RSS feed.

It's a very good summary of what I've learned about grief over the past fifteen years and I agree with the author: we should share her conclusions broadly. So at the risk of seeming over-derivative in these remarks, I'll summarize these points she makes about grief -- and you can read about them in detail in her 1997 book "Transcending Loss":

First, grief is a normal reaction -- the natural response to the death of a loved one. While we want to avoid the messiness of deep sorrow, there is no way out except through the pain (as Epstein also says) -- in manageable doses over a long period of time. Avoiding pain simply forces it deep into the heart where it subtly affects emotional and physical health.

Second, grief is hard work. It isn't easy and it isn't pretty. It involves tears, sleepless nights, pain, sorrow and a heartache that knocks you to your knees.

Third, echoing Dr. Epstein and Nancy Berns, Bush says that grief doesn't offer closure. Closure is an idea that we like because we want to tie up our emotional messes with a bow and put them in the back of a closet. But grief refuses to play this game. Grief tends towards healing not closure.

Fourth, grief is lifelong -- Although we all want quick fixes and short-term solutions, grief won't accommodate us. Many griever know that the second year is actually harder than the first -- the shock has worn off and the reality of the pain has sunk in. No matter how many years go by, there will be days when grief bursts through with a certain rawness. There will be days, even decades later, when sadness crosses over like a storm cloud. And likely, every day going

forward will involve some memory, some connection to missing the beloved.

Fifth, grievors need to stay connected to the deceased -- it is healthy to keep the connection alive: honor the birthdays and departure days of deceased loved ones. Their physical presence may be gone, but they remain in relationship to the griever in a new way beyond form, a way based in spirit and love.

Sixth, grievors are changed forever -- Those expecting us to eventually get back to their old selves, will be quite disappointed. Grief teaches about living and dying, about pain and love and about impermanence. It is even possible to use grief as a springboard for compassion, wisdom, and open-heartedness.

Finally, grievors can choose transcendence. Transcendence has to do with gaining perspective, seeing in a new way and holding pain in a larger context. Seeing one's grief from a larger perspective allows it to be bearable and gives it meaning. For one, transcendence might mean reaching out to those who suffer. For another, it might mean giving to a cause that will benefit others.

Grievors who choose transcendence recognize that they are not alone, that they share a common human condition, and that they are among so many who have experienced love and loss. They use their pain in a way that touches others. The pain is still there, of course, but it is transformed.

Sister Rupp talks about transcendence, too. After all, transcendence and resurrection have a good deal in common.

She comments, "I discovered that for the Christian, hello always follows goodbye in some form if we allow it. There is, or can be, new life, although it will be different from the life we knew before. The resurrection of Jesus and the promises of God are too strong to have it be any other way."

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In a homily in 2008, Peter told us more about a visit to a gravesite at Pacific View and the resurrection.

He told us this:

“Last Easter, I told the story of going up Pacific View Drive with a parishioner to visit the grave of her beloved. While there we saw a woman kneeling before two gravestones and heard her praying aloud.

“When we, and she, finished, that woman got up, looked at us, and volunteered: ‘I come here all the time. You see, my husband and son are buried here. I spend time with God, and, in a sense, with them, too. I don’t want ever to forget them or them to forget me. I know that they are with the Lord. I read in the Bible that ‘as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.’ (1 Cor. 15:22). And I believe that to be true. When I see them: my Lord and my God, and my husband, and my son ...we sure won’t be strangers.

“As we walked away, my friend, our parishioner, said to me, ‘I’m sorry, Peter, but that’s the best sermon I have ever heard!’

“Anyone who goes to the cemetery to visit their child,” Peter continued, “like Mary in the Easter Gospel and that wonderful woman at Pacific View, lives in a ‘Good Friday world’ (see page 65.)

“But just up our street, that woman allowed God to break through her grief and comfort her.

“She knows that Christ is risen. She lives as an Easter Christian in a Good Friday world. She understands that there is Life beyond our body-boundness. She shares the love of her husband and son across that boundary and looks forward to ‘the stone’ being rolled away one more time.”

In closing, a poem, and then a prayer about all this that Sister Rupp wrote in “Praying Our Goodbyes.”

Death in the Family

The poem is Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Steal." Brooke asked that it be read at his funeral. I wish I had read it myself while Peter and Mike and I visited Sue's grave in June because it is just so fitting ... so very fitting.

But that was Brooke -- always teaching us.

A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal (William Wordsworth, 1798)

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

Rest in peace, Susan and Brooke.

Sister Rupp's prayer is called, "Prayer of One Who Feels Lost"

Let us pray:
Dear God,
why do I keep fighting you off?
One part of me wants you desperately,
another part of me unknowingly
pushes you back and runs away.

What is there in me that
so contradicts my desire for you?
These transition days, these passageways,
are calling me to let go of old securities,
to give myself over into your hands.

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Like Jesus who struggled with the pain
I, too, fight the "let it all be done."
Loneliness, lostness, non-belonging,
all these hurts strike out at me,
leaving me pained with this present goodbye.

I want to be more but I fight the growing.
I want to be new but I hang unto the old.
I want to live but I won't face the dying.
I want to be whole but cannot bear
to gather up the pieces into one.

Is it that I refuse to be out of control,
to let the tears take their humbling journey,
to allow my spirit to feel its depression,
to stay with the insecurity of "no home"?
Now is the time. You call to me,
begging me to let you have my life,
inviting me to taste the darkness
so I can be filled with the light,
allowing me to lose my direction
so that I will find my way home to you.
Amen

---Joyce Rupp
Praying Our Goodbyes

Grace, Mercy and Peace be with us all.

November 2013

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