

The Congregational Church of Hollis, NH, UCC
Rev Bob Macfarlane, Interim Minister

Sunday, March 16, 2014

“In My End is My Beginning”

Psalm 23

Partway between Edinburgh and Sterling in Scotland, there lies a small burgh by the name of Linlithgow, which close to a thousand years ago, was built a Palace which over the centuries would house some of the most famous kings and Queens of Scotland and England. One such child was born in December of 1542, and her name was Mary.

Suffice it to say, after a long-suffering life of intrigue, Mary Queen of Scots was beheaded in the Tower of London on February 8, 1587, at the age of 45. Many of you have seen movies or read historical novels about the event. The point is this: that she was an extremely devout Christian, and her final words before being led to her execution, were these: **“In my end is my beginning.”**

Such words were strong and bold and faith-filled. And they not only helped Mary Queen of Scots to face death with dignity, those words also have helped countless others over the centuries to understand, from a very short phrase, the content of a person’s Christian faith, and the ability of a person’s heart to connect with the very heart of Christ himself.

So it is, that “In my end, is my beginning,” said the Queen. And we too can say with confidence, **“In my OWN end, lies my OWN beginning!”** For David the Psalmist, for Jesus himself, for the Queen, and for each of us, we walk in faith, and we can say, “The Lord is my shepherd, and yea though I walk through the shadows of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord, forever.”

All this is to introduce you, on this Second Sunday of Lent, to the concepts found in the excellently written and produced booklet by your own Stewardship Committee, entitled, **“The Christian End of Life Planning Guide.”** The Guide fills a vital need within the life of the congregation, because it walks families through a variety of essential understandings about coping with the eventual death of loved ones, and even our own deaths. And so we thank the Stewardship people for their profoundly insightful booklet, as they have filled a need for each one of us, and we can be thankful.

For it is not easy to address the concept of death. There is hardly a day goes by that it is not announced that some national figure or world personality has died. And while we may often pause for a moment of silent appreciation, we soon go about our lives and our business. Only when an event becomes more personal, like the shooting of children in Newtown, or the mysterious loss of the jet liner over Malaysia, does our attention span lengthen. But except for the immediate family whose grief is profound, and for a small circle of friends, life continues as usual. Death REALLY hits home to us, when we lose a parent or grandparent, a spouse or perhaps even a child, or a very best friend we have held close all our lives.

These are the times when our faith is tested, and when we must summon all our reserves of confidence and belief and trust, that God is in control, that God will indeed lead us home, and that all will, at the last, be well. Again, the Psalmist brings us back, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

In Sunday School, or in literature, or as we go about our daily lives, the biblical phrases may be quite academic and hypothetical. But when push comes to shove, when we are up against the raw issues of life and death, when we must let go of one whom we love, when we are faced with making arrangements for funerals and memorial services, then it gets tough, and tears flow, we face the regrets of the omissions and transgressions in our relationships - the things unsaid we wish we'd said, the things said we wish we could take back.

As you leave worship this morning, the Deacons and Stewardship people will be handing out – one to a family please – this wonderful booklet, and it is their hope that you will take serious moments to read it, and to talk together with your families, the contents within. Let me just briefly walk you through and highlight some of its points.

First, the booklet addresses the importance of conversations - your conversations among family members about each one's health care wishes. For instance, often a parent may die, and yet the children have absolutely no idea whether Mom or Dad wished to have a casket funeral or a cremation memorial service. But if you as the parent have written down, and then talked together about your specific wishes, and perhaps even made directives to the funeral home itself, then there will be no confusion at the time of death.

And there will be a sense of security and confidence by the family, that you are making wise choices. But by saying to ourselves, "Oh, they'll know what to do," we set in motion a whole chain of unresolved and unsure decisions. One of the BEST things we can do for those who must see to our final decisions on our behalf, is to have thoughtfully made known to them, our own wishes. And this booklet addresses those concerns and gives guidance to make those decisions, and make them well.

It suggests you might write some of your own obituary; to write something personal to each of those you love; to advise others about possible organ donations; listing of your passwords for laptops and iphones and bank accounts; gifts you'd like to give from your estate to your university or church or favorite charity; thoughts like hymns to be sung at your funeral, favorite scripture or poem or sayings; veterans honors, living wills, and so much more.

This booklet is a treasure trove of ideas, there to stimulate you and those you love, to be PRO-ACTIVE in helping you and your family to be secure in the knowledge that you have planned well.

Our faith informs us, as it informed Mary Queen of Scots, that "in my end is my beginning," and the immortal words of Job, put to incredible music, help us to both live in this world, and move into the next with confidence, singing, "I know that my redeemer liveth."

Amen.

"The Christian End of Life Planning Guide" was written and distributed by the Stewardship Committee of the Congregational Church of Hollis, NH, UCC, under the Chairmanship of Darrell Stam. Copies may be secured by inquiring at the Church Office, 603-465-7797, churchoffice@hollischurch.org

"In My End is My Beginning" Sermon written for Sunday, March 16, 2014, by Rev. Robert B. Macfarlane, who is Interim Minister of the Church, 508-331-8831, revbobmac@aol.com