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2 Lent, Year B  
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## **Billy Graham on Life and Death**

Growing up I watched a lot of TV preachers. They were, quite simply, good television. I was not drawn so much to their message, but I was fascinated about how they delivered it. They were, to my eyes, showmen. Some of them, not all, hucksters. Modern snake oil peddlers. Jimmy Swaggart. Jim Bakker. Jerry Falwell. Selling prayer cloths for hundreds of dollars to the proverbial little old lady watching from home living off of her social security check. Some of them stomped around the stage with a well-worn Bible in hand. Others lined up people in the aisles to heal from all kinds of illnesses – with a hole scum of people assigned to catch them when they fell over. And they always fell back. I remember when Oral Roberts urged followers to give money to his university – named for him of course – or God would “call him home.” I would watch these television evangelists with a combination of cynicism and grudging fascination.

Billy Graham by all accounts was in a different category. This past week the evangelist died at the age of 99. Like any person in the public eye for so long, his passing has invited many to consider his legacy. He was an evangelist to millions of people around the world – the figure quoted is 200 million. He was a councilor to presidents. He escaped many of the excesses of his more dubious evangelist contemporaries. Yet Graham’s legacy in the Civil Rights Movement was mixed. He was a man born in the heart of the Jim Crow south who thought the best way to fight racism was to convert people’s hearts to Christ – so he was not the strongest advocate for institutional change that took another preacher – Dr. King – down a different path.

The reason this morning I wanted to pause to comment on Graham’s life and legacy is to square some of his words with that of the gospel this morning.

By Chapter 8 in Mark, Jesus is getting serious with his disciples. He is asking all of the big questions. Mark 8:27-38: “Who do people say that I am?” And he spoke to them about this death, less they think that the miracle, teaching and healing ‘show on the road’ would never come to an end. He taught them that he would suffer, be rejected, killed and rise again three days later. If they wanted to follow him, they would have to pick up their crosses. Jesus led them right into paradox and mystery: If they wanted to save their life, they would have to lose it. If they trusted enough to give in and give their lives over to him, they would save it. They would be saved. These are verses I’m sure Billy Graham preached on the many of his crusades – picking up crosses and saving souls.

Peter did not want to hear about Jesus suffering and dying.

Which leads us to another serious subject that Billy Graham talked about quite often. (“How an aging Billy Graham approached his own death” by Grant Wacker in the Washington Post February 21, 2018)

When Graham preached, he said that “death was, of course, inevitable.” “As no one knew when Christ would return,” he said, “everyone should think instead about the sure thing they did know:

the certainty of their own death.” He repeatedly insisted that death fell on everyone. Graham would quote Anglican poet and priest John Donne, who said that there’s a democracy about death. ‘It comes equally to us all and makes us all equal when it comes.’

In a Washington Post article, Graham noted that many people tried to avoid this inescapable reality by playing word games, by changing the title of a cemetery to a memorial park, for example. But he left them no loopholes. First, he said, “accept the fact that you will die.” Second, “make arrangements.” Third, “make provision for those you are leaving behind.” And finally, “make an appointment with God.”

Some of what Graham said can sound more slogan-like than the paradox and mystery we may be used to hearing in church. But one thing is undeniable, Graham’s words touched millions of people’s hearts and led them closer to God.

How about that list? Accept the fact that you will die. Isn’t that how we started Lent on Ash Wednesday? Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.

Make arrangements. There is nothing wrong and everything right and real about having conversations about life and death along the way. Everyone here can have a file or one place where loved one’s can go and learn what they need to know.

Make provision for those you are leaving behind – and that only works when people don’t skip the second step. It is a matter I bring up with parents set to baptize their babies: do they have a Will? Have they, have we, made plans.

Make an appointment with God. We hope that can mean: come to church. Come back to church. Sit and pray. Find quiet. Say your prayers. Confess your shortcomings. Leave room for the holy.

If you don’t know where or how to begin, talk to me, or David or Charlie. That is what we help people do: navigate this conversation about life and death that is far from easy.

We can see how Graham tackled today’s gospels saving and losing equation: “I urge each of you to invest your lives, not just spend them,” Graham told a group of young people. You cannot count your days, but you can make your days count.” A good life and a good time were not the same.

Truth-filled words for generations of people today who might decide to follow – but only for so long – who may participate but are reluctant to join.

When I sit and talk with people who have gotten serious when it comes to facing what they know will come, eventually we approach the subject of fear. Are they afraid, as much as Peter was for Jesus, to die?

Billy Graham showed that it is possible to have no fear of death, but to be very afraid of dying. He said he had seen “some of the terrible things that happen to people that are dying. I don’t want that.”

Graham told a friend that he was prepared for death but not for growing old.

Each week even without knowing it, we reencounter what Jesus told his disciples in Mark 8. We say: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. We place our lives in the past, the present and the future.

And, I believe, our present can be made more alive and meaningful when we're able to see and learn from where we have been and to peer out and imagine our future beyond what we know. I don't think there's anything wrong with imagining a heaven as Billy Graham did -- "a place where there will be no sorrow and no parting, no pain, no sickness, no death, no quarrels, no misunderstandings, no sin and no cares" -- if, and it's a big if, if it does not deter us from facing head on the work our world requires today.

I think that is why Jesus pushed so hard up again Peter: "Get behind me, Satan!"

The many images of Lent of wilderness and journey only work if we know what are heading for and towards. There will be a showdown in Jerusalem. A trial. A final word. A suffering and a death. And a rising and a new day.