



Liturgical Day: Celebrating the Life and Faith of John Sibley Baker

Sermon Title: Preceded in Death

Date: December 28, 2008

To Chuck; to Lynne and Michael; to all of you who are friends of our brother John: grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We're going to miss John around here. John was one of those people who was just easy – just enjoyable to be with. He always had a warm smile and a kind word for me every time I saw him. He had his share of suffering in his last few years. The worst of it was losing his Janet. But there were health struggles and challenges too. John wasn't one to complain much, though. He just gave you that easy smile, and a slight shrug of the shoulders. We're going to miss John around here.

Chuck and Lynne: I know you are going to miss him even more. He has been sick for some time now, and you've had a while to prepare yourselves for this. But it is still hard, and I know you will miss him a great deal. He was a wonderful father. He loved you a great deal. You loved him too. And when there is deep love like that, it makes it even more difficult to say farewell. So please know that this group of friends will promise to hold you in our prayers, and we will be there for you if there is ever anything we can do to support you.

John was a good friend of this faith community. He wasn't an active member for many years. He really served more as Janet's constant companion. He would worship with us occasionally, but most of the time I spent with John took place when I would bump into him with Janet at the local grocery store. We'd usually stop and visit for a while. He was always interested to hear how things were going here at Saint Peter, or what was happening with my family. John was a genuinely caring man. A man who was really interested in others. Both he and Janet were.

It wasn't until recently that I learned John had been headed towards ministry in his younger years. He was a faithful man, and had a love for the church. He was also a reflective man. He loved to read – and you could find both theology and philosophy books on his bookshelf. He liked to think about the meaning of scripture passages, and he liked to wrestle with hard questions.

My guess is that John would have been a fine pastor. But some hard experiences around World War II changed the course of his life. He lost his love for the church for a while. But he never lost his love for God. He continued to think, and pray, and strive to be the person God called him to be. He was proudly supportive of Janet's involvement both in the church and in the community, but for the most part, it was Janet that we saw around Saint Peter.

I've been thinking a lot about the two of them since John died. As the newspaper obituaries put it, *John was "preceded in death" by Janet, his wife of nearly fifty years.* "Preceded in Death" – it is an interesting turn of the phrase, isn't it? Usually it means that someone who was close to the deceased had died before he or she did. "Preceded in death" – it is a phrase that puts the person we are remembering in the context of their family. It hints at the larger story of who has influenced that person's life, and at what good byes they have had to say along the way. But today, it occurs to me that there is another way to interpret that short phrase. It may be that some times, when a person precedes a loved one in

FIRST LESSON

PSALM 46:1-7

SECOND LESSON

ECCLESIASTES 3:1-11

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. JOHN 1:1-14

PRAYER OF THE DAY

O GOD OF GRACE AND GLORY,
WE REMEMBER BEFORE YOU
TODAY OUR BROTHER, JOHN
SIBLEY BAKER. WE THANK YOU
FOR GIVING HIM TO US TO
KNOW AND TO LOVE AS A
COMPANION IN OUR
PILGRIMAGE ON EARTH. IN
YOUR BOUNDLESS
COMPASSION, CONSOLE US
WHO MOURN. GIVE US YOUR
AID, SO WE MAY SEE IN DEATH
THE GATE TO ETERNAL LIFE,
THAT WE MAY CONTINUE OUR
COURSE ON EARTH IN
CONFIDENCE UNTIL, BY YOUR
CALL, WE ARE REUNITED WITH
THOSE WHO HAVE GONE
BEFORE US; THROUGH YOUR
SON, JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD.
AMEN.

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God's work. Our hands.

death, it has to do with more than chronology. It may be that there is a sense of leading and guiding involved when someone precedes another in death. That certainly was the case with Janet and John. Although John wasn't a church-going man for a good share of his life, his faith grew strong over the years. And when Janet passed from this life to the next, it had an impact on John. It brought him back to the church. It allowed him to recommit himself to weekly worship. Once she was gone, John rarely missed being with us on a Sunday morning. Worship was a way for John to stay connected with her, and it was also a way for him to nourish his faith, which connected him with God. When Janet died, she preceded John – she went ahead of John – she led him and guided him back to this community of faith, where for two and a half years he was loved and nurtured and encouraged.

There was a deep current of faith running through this man. I saw it most clearly in our last visits. John was deciding whether or not to allow the doctors to start him on a chemotherapy routine. He was concerned that the treatments might be so demanding that his quality of life would suffer. I was struck by how thoughtful and purposeful he was in thinking the issues through. But I was even more struck by how unafraid he was of the possibility that he would die soon. More so than most, it appeared to me that John was completely comfortable with the prospect of going to be with God, and actually looking forward to having his hope of being reunited with Janet fulfilled. You learn a lot about a person's faith when death comes near. John faced his own death without fear – a sign of a man whose faith is certain, and who had learned how to trust in God.

This afternoon we read the Gospel lesson appointed for Christmas Day. It is a beautiful lesson. As I've said many times, it is one of my favorite scripture passages. Today, I am especially mindful of the 12th verse:

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

As we think about John, and what was the essence of his life, we are mindful that John is one who received the good news of Jesus Christ as a young man and who embraced that good news throughout his life. John is one who believed in the promises given to him in baptism. John is one who truly became a child of God. John's faith was renewed in these past years, and it became his source of strength and hope and peace, even as he considered the possibility of his own death.

It is hard to lose someone we love, especially during this time of year. At Christmas time, when the whole world seems to focus on good will and good cheer, it is even more painful to experience loss and grief. But at the heart of the Christmas season is an important message for those of us who are in pain. Christmas is primarily a season when we remember that Christ was born in Bethlehem. But it is also a season when we recall that Christ is born into our hearts and homes whenever we receive the good news of Jesus Christ; whenever we believe in the promises given to us in baptism. I'm thankful that Christ found a place in John's heart. I'm thankful that we can say with certainty that John has gone on to be with his maker. I'm thankful that even while we mourn his loss, we can take comfort in the knowledge that he is now in God's care.

In this Christmas season, may we also recognize the ways in which Christ is seeking to be born into our lives. And may it fill us with faith, and hope, and love, and joy. Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (January 2, 2009)

Gospel Lesson (English Text)

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ⁱ

Gospel Lesson (Greek Text):

¹ Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος. ² οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν. ³ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν ὃ γέγονεν ⁴ ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων ⁵ καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν. ⁶ Ἐγένετο νθρωπος, ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ, ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης ⁷ οὗτος ἦλθεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν να μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός, ἵνα πάντες πιστεύσωσιν δι' αὐτοῦ. ⁸ οὐκ ἦν ἐκεῖνος τὸ φῶς, ἀλλ' ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός. ⁹ Ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, ὃ φωτίζει πάντα νθρωπον, ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον. ¹⁰ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἦν, καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω. ¹¹ εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἦλθεν, καὶ οἱ διοὶ αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον. ¹² ὅσοι δὲ λαβὼν αὐτὸν, ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ νομα αὐτοῦ, ¹³ οὐκ ἐξ αἱμάτων οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρὸς ἀλλ' ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν. ¹⁴ Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας. ⁱⁱ

ⁱ St. John 1:1-14, *New Revised Version Bible* (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ⁱⁱ St. John 1:1-14, *The Greek New Testament*, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).