

Final Sermon
Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year B
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
The Rev. Ian Burch
March 17, 2024

I've never been a rector before, so I have never had to stop being a rector before, and trying to make sense of this mountain of feelings—sadness and hope, excitement, and grief—feels daunting. Competing ideas about what to say this morning have popped into my head—is this a funny sermon? A hopeful sermon? A sad sermon? Do we talk about Jesus? Or about the eight years of ministry we have shared? Over and over again, strangely, what popped into my head are two scenes from a movie. My favorite movie, in fact. The film that keeps coming into my head is called *Antonia's Line*, and I showed it here many years ago. I'm sure I have seen it 15 or 20 times, and I think it is about the most perfect movie ever made. I won't drag you through the whole plot—just go see it—but I will tell you about the two scenes that have been with me these last few weeks.

In the first, the main character, Antonia, is an old woman. She rises from her bed, walks to the mirror hanging on the wall, and says matter-of-factly: today is a good day to die. There is no rancor and no pity in her voice. She speaks as one who is at peace with what is coming. The movie sort of continues with her memories of a life well lived—friends, family, enemies, lovers, saints, and sinners all surrounding her. In the second scene that's been on my mind, the film ends with Antonia presiding over a large table with her children and grandchildren all around her as well as her dear friends. But when you start to look closely, you can tell that Antonia is not just feasting with the living. Perhaps because she knows that it's her last day on earth, she has a special vision. All around the dinner table are people who she has lost over the years—her parents, loved ones, and family members. People who are now dead have been able to come and feast, and Antonia is able to see them with her special sight.

I think I like that film because, really, Antonia's final act is to feast with the living and the dead, and there is nothing more Christian than that. In fact, Christians have been putting bones and relics in the foundations of altars forever, and our prayers at the Eucharist recall dead matriarchs and patriarchs, the martyrs and the saints, and our patron, St. Mark, along with all living and the dead who have ever worshiped God at the table and whoever WILL worship God at the table. This is one of the great pieces of Christian wisdom: we have a very flexible view of death. Or in the words of St. Paul, "death where is thy sting; grave where is thy victory."

Our flexible attitude toward death is a boon to us at the big death of a friend or a loved one. If you've been to a funeral service lately, you know we start them with a beautiful anthem about how Christians make our song even as we go down to the grave. We know that death is not more powerful than God and that God will bring all creation back to God's self in the fullness of time.

But our flexible attitude toward death doesn't stop at the big death. We bring it to the little deaths as well—the divorce, the lost job, the midlife crisis, the family fight. When these things in our lives get broken, Christian people take some of their endless optimism and bring it to bear. There

is no situation that cannot be redeemed, and there is no breach in this world too deep for God's mending.

And so, hopefully not being too terribly dramatic, the ending of a pastoral relationship after eight years has felt to me like a little death. You have been in my life for all these years as family, and I hope that I have been in your life in the same way. I have born witness to births and deaths, to divorces and marriages, to retirements and job searches. I have blessed you every week; I have forgiven your sins; I have fed you bread and wine. I have read the Gospel and proclaimed the word of God. I have announced the resurrection of Jesus every year that we have been together. And you have prayed with me. Worshiped God with me. Joked with me. Fed me. Encouraged me. Challenged me. And taught me to be a better priest.

I know there have been times when I have met or exceeded your expectations, and I know there are times when I have not lived up to your expectations. I hope that if there is something that needs mending, it can be mended at this table, where all saints and sinners come to the banquet.

I know that you are in remarkable hands. Your vestry is without a doubt the strongest board I have seen in a while. Their leadership is steady and wise.

I will miss you terribly. I will miss all the little St. Mark's quirks—the 2x4s that we use to lock the front door, the way the Tuesday night gardeners always have a little wine and cheese before they go home for the night, the way the organ sometimes just plays a note by itself for no reason at all. I will also miss the soul of St. Mark's—the way that you care for one another like no other church I have been in; the way that you weave in new people no matter their creed or background or status; the way that you keep music and worship at the center of your lives without ever being too stuffy or precious about it. I will miss the ways that you have created a culture of healing for all sorts of people—queer people, people from difficult religious backgrounds, widows and widowers, and those who are questioning this whole Christian project. Please keep doing what you do so well.

And missing you does feel like a little death. Which is why I think Jesus' words from our Gospel hit me so powerfully this week: “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.” I wonder what is next for you. I wonder what fruit you will bear in the days and weeks to come. I do not know quite what they will be, but I know that God has promised that the harvest will be plentiful, and I believe that with every bone in me.

I won't say that it is a good day to die. But, I wonder if I can take some wisdom from Antonia, who looked calmly in the mirror and announced the beginning of her next chapter. It is a good day to part. And, as with Antonia, we will practice our last day with one another in the Christian way—with a feast for the living and the dead. It is a good day to part because God requires that I continue the work of resurrection as a priest and God requires you to continue the work of resurrection as members of Christ's body. So, while will mourn this little death, we Christians know that God is in the business of transforming everything to God's purpose. Amen.