

Old South Church in Boston

December 15, 2013 - Third Sunday in Advent

Generation to Generation, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor, Senior Minister

Based on *The Magnificat*

Every arrival portends a leave-taking. Every birth portends its own death.

Mary knows it. Did you hear it in her song? Her song is triumphant. It is exultant. God bless her, she's pregnant! She's going to have a baby! Yet, even as she celebrates and anticipates birth, she cannot help but foresee, dying. Hers. Her unborn child's.

Every arrival portends a leave-taking. Every birth—even Jesus' birth—portends its own death.

The Magi knew it. No sooner is the Christ child born than they arrive with their old men's gifts: frankincense and myrrh. Spices with which to prepare the body for burial. Happy Birthday, Jesus.

It is not easy for me to say this to you. As your pastor, it is not an easy thing to say, but it is my duty: you will die. Each of you. All of you. Every single one of you.

The death rate among us: 100%. Even Jesus died. Apostles Creed insists: *He was crucified, died, and was buried*. The ancient creeds are particular on this point. They want you to know this was no resuscitation. *Jesus was crucified, died and was buried*.

The death rate among us, including Jesus: 100%. We know it: this hard-as-steel-truth. But it's not easy to face. Not easy to bear. Not easy to talk about especially, God help us, with our own families.

But it is not so for young Mary. Mary is marvelously, wondrously tuned in to, reconciled to the hard-as-steel-fact of passing on. Here is why. Here is Mary's secret to being reconciled to death: Mary links the fact of passing on (the fact of her own passing on) with the art of passing down ... of bequeathing.

Think of Mary's song as her last will and testament. In it she bequeaths her son to the ages.

As if the gift of her son is not enough, there is more. This young woman, this girl-child, gifts us with a song – a song that is itself a kind of kaleidoscope: with shifting and overlapping glimpses and fragments of past and future, of ancestors and descendants, of remembrance and inheritance, of a promise that shimmers and shifts in the light. A promise passed down and taken up: generation by generation, taken up, parent to child, teacher to student church to church, down through the millennia. A promise taken up here, now in our own arms in this season of Advent. A promise carried in white lights and fragrant greens, in memorial poinsettias, in carols and in candles to pierce the night

Every birth portends its own death. Every arrival portends a leave-taking.

But, listen now! Hear this! With every leave-taking, there can be a leaving, a bequeathing, a gifting, a passing down.

Let me say it clear: When you link the fact of your own dying with your own gifting to the next generation—it will take the sting out of death. I promise. So help me God.

Some examples:

Benjamin Franklin, a child of this church, was like Mary, reconciled to his own dying and marvelously and wondrously tuned in to the way the generations are linked. He linked the fact of his own passing on to the art of passing down.

Listen!

I, Benjamin Franklin... do make and declare my last will and testament as follows:

I have considered that, among artisans, good apprentices are most likely to make good citizens, and, having myself been bred to a manual art, printing, in my native town of Boston, and afterwards assisted to set up my business in Philadelphia by kind loans of money from two friends ... which was the foundation of my fortuneI wish to be useful even after my death, if possible, in forming and advancing other young men, that may be serviceable to their country... To this end... I give one thousand pounds sterling to the inhabitants of the town of Boston...

The said sum... shall be managed under the direction of the selectmen, united with the ministers of the oldest Episcopalian, Congregational, and Presbyterian churches in that town, who are to let out the sum upon interest... to assist young married artificers in setting up their business...It is my desire that this institution should take place and begin to operate within one year after my decease ...In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and Seal this twenty-third day of June, Anno Domini one thousand Seven hundred and eighty nine.

B. Franklin.

The institution Benjamin Franklin imagined, and named and provided for in his will? Located blocks from here, in the South End, the Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology educates young men and women from Dorchester, Mattapan, Roxbury ... young men and women of every nationality and ethnicity ... educates and equips them with practical skills: automotive technology, HAVAC, opticianary, computer science and more.

Benjamin Franklin has passed on ... but not before passing down, not before gifting to the next generation a part of his own self and soul.

Then, there is Mary Norton. Mary Norton is perhaps best described as the mother of Old South Church. She is our Sarah, our matriarch and progenitor. She too linked her own dying, her own inevitable passing on to the art—the high art, the generative, imaginative, affectionate art—of passing down. Listen!

In the name of God, Amen. The twentieth day of August In the year of Our Lord, one thousand, six hundred and seventy-seven., I Mary Norton of Boston....Relict Widow of The Rev. John Norton... commend my soul to God who gave it, and my body to the earth... I give and bequeath unto (Old South) Church in Boston, my now dwelling house with all the land belonging to the same, as it is situated near the Meeting House ... with all profits, privileges, rights and appurtenances whatsoever ... for the use of said Church successively forever. In witness thereof, I the said Mary Norton, have hereunto set my hand and seal the day and year first above written.

Mary Norton was one gutsy woman and Old South would not be here without Mary Norton. During her life she gifted us—to be precise, she gifted a rag-tag band of rebellious Puritan young couples ... young couples determined to make the waters of baptism ever more available ...determined to adjust the flow of the waters of baptism from a trickle to a gush because God’s grace is more gush than trickle.

During her life, Mary Norton gifted us the land on which we built our first meeting house and then our second meeting house.

Later, in her will, in her dying, she gifted us with yet more land and with her own house and home ... which became the parsonage for generations of our ministers (until the house perished in Boston’s Great Fire).

Mary Norton’s last will and testament enabled this church to carry on...to give bold witness, extravagant witness to this: the grace of God is more gush than trickle and that we have no business controlling the valve.

Now, lest you think a worthy will, a worthy gifting to the next generation requires property and wealth, Steve and Liz Morgan (who are still very much with us) have drawn up ethical wills. Wills in which they make a stand against capital punishment in a most poignant statement. Listen!

I, Stephen V. Morgan, resident of and domiciled in the Town of Amherst, County of Hillsborough, and State of New Hampshire, do hereby make, publish and declare this to be my last will and testamentI hereby declare that should I die as a result of a violent crime, I request that the person or persons found guilty for my killing not be subject to or put in jeopardy of the death penalty under any circumstances, no matter how heinous their crime or how much I have suffered.

Sisters and brothers, as your pastor, it is my bounden duty to tell you this hard truth: you will die. This embodied, earthly gig, this sweet, sweet gig—the one that comes with the taste of strawberry ice cream and the aroma of fresh ground coffee and the sound of an infant’s squeal—it is temporary.

I know you know it. But I also know it’s not easy to face. Not easy to bear. Not easy to talk about especially, God help us, with our own families.

That’s where Mary comes in. Mary links the hard-as-steel fact of passing on with the strong, imaginative, generative, affectionate art of passing down, of bequeathing.

Every arrival portends a leave-taking. Every birth portends its own death. You will die. Yet, here is my promise to you: If you take up the art of passing down, it will soothe the sting of passing on. So help me God.

So Mere Mortal, let me put the challenge clear. How might your dying beget a birthing? How might you gift the generations to follow? How might you take up the strong, imaginative, generative and affectionate art of passing down?

If you set your heart to this challenge, it will ease the sting of death. I promise. So help me God.