“Appointment in Samarra”
1 Samuel 20:3, James 4:14

A Sermon
Delivered by
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Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight O Lord our Strength and Redeemer, Amen.

This Sunday morning finds us all wrestling with and grieving the sudden and sad events that began to unfold last Saturday and took us to the Baltimore Shock Trauma Center where this week we lost two young men – Midshipman Will McKamey, and just yesterday Midshipman Hans Loewen. We are all wrestling with these losses in our own way, in part dependent upon how well we knew Will and Hans. And yet, whether we knew them or not, we grieve as a family, we feel the pain of others’ grief and sorrow, and as the Body of Christ, we pray for one another that we might fill up that which is lacking in Christ’s sufferings.

In some sense our scripture passages for today have much to say to us right where we are. In 1st Samuel 16, we have the story of the anointing of David, where we see a young man in the bloom of his life, called and set apart by God for great things. In Psalm 23, we hear the meditations of that man as he comforts himself saying, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me, Your rod and thy staff, they comfort me…” And in our Gospel reading from John 9, we’re met with the man born blind and the disciples’ question to Jesus, in essence, ”Why?” ‘Why is it that life so often deals such harsh blows?’” To which Jesus suggests that “through such things, the Glory of God is somehow revealed.” All of these passages are given to us as words of encouragement in the midst of trial and loss. For this is the promise of God’s word. It is always timely, always profitable, it does not return void but accomplishes that which God intends…

As we wrestle with the events of this week - and the loss of Midshipman Max Allen 6 weeks ago- and as I’ve listened to Midshipmen and others point out the suddenness of it all, one gathering truth has presented itself over and over. I’ve heard it spoken by young and old alike – those of faith and those still on their journey to find faith. It’s the truth of the brevity of life, the fragile nature of this life that God has given us. I don’t know how many people have been struck by the realization that in a matter of seconds everything can change. How
fragile life is. Even the youngest and strongest and most promising in our midst cannot be sure of their next breath. We hear this truth in 1st Samuel 20, verse 3, where Jonathan, Saul’s son, tries to comfort David by telling him that despite the dangers David’s facing, he’ll be safe and need not worry. However David knows that life is far more fragile than that. He replies to Jonathan, “As the Lord lives, and as your soul lives, there is but a step between me and death.” “There is but a step between me and death” - This is really the condition of all of us, and these past weeks have made that very clear. You and I are promised many things in Scripture, but when we breathe our last, only God knows.

It’s along these lines that I am reminded of a little known story taken right out of the pages of this chapel’s history…a story every Midshipmen should know, especially in times like these. The great preacher, Peter Marshall, Pastor of New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington D.C. who would go on to be the Chaplain to the U.S. Senate, was invited to Annapolis to speak to the Brigade of Midshipmen in this very Chapel from this very pulpit on Sunday morning, December 7th 1941. In the book, A Man Called Peter, written by his wife, Catherine, we’re told that all week leading up to this service in Annapolis, Reverend Marshall had the peculiar feeling that somehow God wanted him to preach a different message than the one he’d been planning. It was a strange feeling which he couldn’t shake, and when he voiced this to Chaplain Thomas that Sunday morning, Chaplain Thomas encouraged him to preach whatever it was he felt God was leading him to say. The theme that he couldn’t seem to shake all week came from the words of James 4:14. “For what is your life,” the verse says, “it is a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.”

Reverend Marshall preached from this text to a chapel-full of Midshipmen, to include the December graduating class. Remember, chapel attendance was compulsory in those days, and the graduating classes of the early 40s were accelerated so that the Class of ‘42 actually graduated in December of 1941. In his sermon that day Reverend Marshall told the tale of a merchant who lived in the ancient city of Baghdad. One day, the story goes, the merchant sent his servant into the market to buy some goods. Before long the servant came back, white and trembling with fear, and in great agitation. When the merchant asked his servant what was wrong, the servant told him that down in the market, he was jostled by a woman in the crowd, and when he turned around to see her, it was Death herself. And so the servant ran away. Now he cried, “Master, please lend me your horse for I must hasten away to avoid her. I will ride to the city of Samarra and there I will hide and Death will not find me.” The merchant loaned him his horse and bid him farewell to Samarra. The servant galloped away in great haste. Later that night the merchant went down to the market-place himself, and while there, he too saw Death standing in the crowd. He went to her and asked, “Why did you frighten my servant this morning? Why did you make such a threatening gesture?” “I meant no threat,” Death said. “I was just
surprised. I was astonished to see your servant in Baghdad, for I have an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.”

Peter Marshall reminded those Midshipmen that in some sense all of them had an appointment in Samarra, that all of us, will one day, one hour, and at one moment breathe our last…for life is fragile. It’s like a spark that rises up in the air burning brightly for a moment and then goes out. But he didn’t stop there in his sermon that day. He said that while every one of us has that appointment in Samarra, this should not be a cause for fear, but in fact should be reason for rejoicing. If we have placed our faith in him who holds the keys to life and death, then we can meet that moment whenever it should come, with great confidence. For Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.” “Consider the caterpillar,” Reverend Marshall said. If that furry green worm only knew what he would one day become, he would lift his hopes above the cabbage, and look forward to that summer morning when he will awaken a butterfly, “when the [cocoon] breaks open, and out of it emerges a…lovely thing, that hoists into the fragrant air delicate sails of beauty…and sails over the fence to kiss the roses.”

None of the Midshipmen who heard the sermon that morning could’ve imagined how important these words would be in the days ahead. After the service, as Peter and his wife were driving back to Washington, suddenly the radio program was interrupted in their car. The broadcast was grave: “Ladies and gentlemen, stand by for an important announcement. This morning, the United States Naval Base at Pearl Harbor has been bombed…” In little more than a month, many of those Midshipmen to whom Peter Marshall had just preached would themselves go down to hero’s graves in strange waters off foreign shores. And soon all of them would be exposed to the risks and dangers of war; and Peter Marshall, under God’s direction, that very morning had offered them the defining words about the reality of eternal life.

From time to time, we’re given the capacity to see more clearly just how fragile life is…how in a moment everything can change, how we are - all of us - only a heartbeat away from our appointment in Samarra. But it’s during these times when we’re also given an opportunity to see…it’s as if Jesus touches our eyes like he did for the man born blind, and we begin to see more clearly the Hope standing before us. We see Jesus saying to us, like he did to Peter, “It is I, do not be afraid.” Like that caterpillar who awakens to find itself a butterfly, if we believe on the One who stands before us – who gave his life for us on the cross and rose from the dead - we too will one day awaken and find ourselves translated to something new, alive with Him. “For if anyone is in Christ, THERE is a new creation, the old things have passed away, behold all things have become new.”
The story is told of a home in which a little boy lived who was sick with an incurable disease. Month after month the boy’s mother nursed him, read to him, and played with him, hoping to keep him from realizing the dreadful truth and finality of the doctor’s diagnosis. But as the weeks went on and he grew no better, the little boy gradually began to understand that he would never be like the other boys he saw playing outside, and even as young as he was, he began to understand the meaning of the term death, and he knew that he too was going to die. One day his mother had been reading to him the great stories of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table: of Lancelot and Guinevere and the great adventures of that kingdom and the last battle in which so many brave knights met their death. As she closed the book, the boy sat silent as though he was deeply stirred with the far-away calling of the land about which she’d read. And then he asked a question that had been weighing on his childish heart: “Mother, what is it like to die? Does it hurt?” Tears came to her eyes and she ran off to the kitchen to supposedly tend to something on the stove. She knew it was a question with deep significance, and she knew it must be answered satisfactorily.

She leaned for a moment against the kitchen cabinet, her knuckles pressed white against the smooth surface, and she spoke a hurried prayer that God would somehow keep her from breaking down before the boy and would tell her how to answer him. And then the Lord spoke. He told her, and she knew immediately how to explain it to him. “Kenneth,” she said as she returned to the room, “do you remember when you were a tiny boy how you used to play so hard all day long that when night came you would be so tired you wouldn’t even undress, you’d just collapse into mother’s bed and fall asleep? Well that was not your bed…it was not where you belonged. And you stayed there only a little while. In the morning, much to your surprise, you would wake up and find yourself in your own bed in your own room. You were there because someone had loved you and taken care of you…your father had come, and with his big strong arms, he’d carried you away. Kenneth, death is just like that. We wake up one morning to find ourselves in the other room – our own room where we belong – because the Lord Jesus loved us. The young boy’s shining, trusting face, looking up into hers told her that the point had gone home, and that there would be no more fear. Several weeks later, he fell asleep just as she’d said.

This week, we’ve seen two of our own fall asleep. And we can entrust them into the loving arms of God knowing that the Lord is good and merciful and He will do what’s right. But we too will fall asleep one day. And there may be only a step between us and that appointment. None of us know when that moment will come. But we do have this moment, right here and now. We have this moment to place our lives into the strong arms of our Lord who one day will carry us to that other room that he’s prepared for those who love him. Jesus says,
“If I’ve prepared a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself that where I am there you may be also. And Thomas said, ‘Lord we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ Jesus said, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life, no man comes to the father but through Me.’ Do you want to know the way this morning? A way through your grief and sorrow? A way where there is no fear of death and peace with God? Then trust in Jesus today. Trust Him. Midshipmen, don’t wait another minute to place yourselves into the loving arms of your Heavenly Father. Rest in him. Believe on Him. Look toward Him. Cry out to Him. For He is the way. He is the truth. He is the resurrection and the life. And all who believe in Him, though we die, yet shall we live forever. Let us pray.

Dear Lord Jesus risen for us, we ask that You burn more brightly in our lives than ever before, that we might long for heaven and love You above all. Lord, if we’ve never met You, if we’ve never known that perfect love that casts out fear, we ask You to enter our heart right now, wash us clean of our sins, give us a new hope, a new life, a new frame of reference, and make us a new creation. Thank you for doing this as You have promised. Amen.