

Grace Johnson Funeral
Bethesda Lutheran Church
New Haven, Connecticut

Isaiah 43:1–3a, 19
Psalm 23
1 Thessalonians 4:13–14, 18
John 14:1-6

I.N.I.

Lutherans love to hear about the promises of God. It should be in their DNA, as the understanding of who God is and how the sacraments are to be understood in Martin Luther's own aha moments is that they are filled with promise.

God, however God is known, in the multiplicity of ways that God has been known and has been revealed, in the end, is a God of promise.

The sacraments, attached to God's Word, offered to yearning souls, poured out and available to infants and adults alike, are contained in promise.

It's a good thing, too, because the other thing that must surely be true about Lutherans is that they are also, inevitably, invariably, anxious people.

Those preparing for a reception worry about how much food to prepare for a smorgasbord. Will there be enough meatballs?

Those preparing the altar for communion puzzle about how many will come to worship. Will there be enough bread and wine?

Those getting ready for Christmas, for Sunday, and for funerals, in Lutheran church offices all around the world, wonder, how many bulletins shall I make?

I don't think that a day goes by where good Lutherans, wherever anxiety can be found, invariable, inevitably find it, and worry.

And I must say they are in good company with their compatriots with other identities. They are in good company with those that lived and breathed in the world of the Bible, whether they were named Thomas, or Thessalonians, or Israel.

And I have to say it today, because it's Advent and almost Christmas, because I'm a Lutheran mouthpiece, and most importantly because we are missing dear Grace,

that God's promise must be the last word, God's promise must occupy and preoccupy our beings, our sayings, and our doings.

Through the mouthpiece the prophet Isaiah God reminds the people who were claimed by the promise to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel that they are safe, they are redeemed.

God has to say to those anxious about whether they will be in Israel or banished into a strange land: Do not fear. And if you are stuck in the dry and dusty wilderness, I will create pathway flowing with a wet and wonderful river.

God has to say through St. Paul to the Thessalonians wondering when Christ would return, what would happen at the end, what would happen to those who died before Christ returned, Jesus claims you, Jesus himself went through death and rose again, so speak about these things in order to encourage one another.

We have to imagine promise today, allow promise to inhabit us today, and speak promise today.

And if not today, then someday, on a day that we know God holds in good keeping for all who are anxious, who are in trouble, who are sick, who are dying, who grieve, and who wonder.

I will always be grateful for Grace's words and posture of promise. She loved church. She loved Bethesda. She was fierce about staying in her home, at her age, with her growing forgetfulness, with her reliance on so many others for connection and transportation—family, friends, church folk.

When I arrived at Bethesda in the Fall of 2010 and began my rhythms of leading worship Grace would ask if I was the new pastor or the interim. She was anxious, wondering if the pastor she was greeting was here to stay, would fill in the slot of so many she had served as secretary, altar guild, cook, volunteer, and worshiper. I would say I was the new pastor.

After the fourth or fifth week she asked me again. Finally I said Grace I'm here forever. Her eyes widened. I think she finally believed it. And then her tune changed. Her greeting changed. From that time on she would say I love coming to worship you know. I never miss it. As long as I can get here, I will be here.

And for that I am grateful, that in the midst of any anxiety about what day it was, where she was going, whether she should bring food to the potluck, whether she had a ride, that when Grace was in church, when she was in worship, she could be at home. She could bask in what Lutherans and others who are joined to the God of the ages love to hear about, the promise of company, the promise of identity, the promise of life, no matter what.

Thomas gets a bad rap in the Gospels because someone gave him the nickname doubting Thomas. But he would have made a good Lutheran, because when anxiety was available to him, he named it. Jesus announces this roominess in his Father's house, this expansion of space where he was going to. He starts out by saying don't be afraid, do not let your hearts be troubled.

Not good enough for Thomas, who asked the question that everyone else was probably thinking, Lord, we have no clue where you are going. How can we come along. For confused and bewildered Thomas, for anxious and fearful people everywhere, for Grace Johnson, Jesus announces how we are going to get to that spacious place that is the house of God: I am the way, and the truth, and the life.

Promise. For Grace. For those who grieve. For those in Advent almost Christmas, God can and will do a new thing, bring us to life again, in God's future. Taste it now, in the bread and cup of promise. Feel it now, in the embrace of one who loves you and offers comfort. And when you are anxious, think of Thomas, the people of Israel, the Thessalonians, and Lutherans everywhere, and know that there is room for you, you are in good company, and the promise of God can be the last word.

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