

**Russell Hentz Funeral
17 November 2011**

Isaiah 61:1-3
Psalm 23
1 Peter 1:3-9
John 11:21-27

I.N.I.

Death interrupts life. A sudden, unexpected death is a huge interruption. Russell Hentz's death is unfortunate. It's awful. Into a loving family, in the midst of November, on the verge of holidays, while Russell was alive with all his doings and interests, death has come.

Words are difficult. Tears wash the faces of Russell's family and loved ones. Grief is the new experience, for Carol, Jessie, Kimmy, Doris, Richard, and Raymond.

So we who are here today on the occasion of death, in the experience of grief, may struggle for words. Perhaps the most meaningful act we can offer is a loving touch, which transfers affection, protection, or strength. And I thank the Hentz family for their openness to receive the outpouring of affection that those who are here today want to extend to you.

I like to think that our rituals of gathering for funerals, as much as words are spoken, stories told, and songs are sung are an enfolding of God's embrace for those bereft and lost.

The lit Paschal or Resurrection Candle announces God's claim on Russell through Baptism into Christ's death and resurrection. On June 21, 1953, Russell's parents Doris and LeRoy brought their youngest child to be washed into God's eternal embrace, acknowledging that their deep love for their baby boy would also be given over to the God of all time, the one who holds the entire universe, the one whose intent for humanity is life and goodness.

The baptized life signals God's intention to claim humanity from its woes, and from its troubles. I'm not sure that Doris or Leroy were thinking about that on June 21, 1953. I'm not sure how much Russell thought about that throughout his 58 years. But I'd like to underline that God claimed Russell, God claims Russell,

and through the ritual that involves touch, Baptism, water on skin, hands on the head perhaps with oil, invokes the Spirit of the living God which Isaiah trumpets about that brings good news to the oppressed, binds up the brokenhearted, frees the captives, and offers an alternative to mourning.

Perhaps this spirit was felt at family vacations at Old Orchard Beach.

Perhaps this spirit was a part of playful banter with his daughters.

Perhaps this spirit was exchanged in ordinary kindnesses with Carole.

Today we light a candle that envelops God's embrace for a broken humanity, and declare God's intention for life, for a full life, for a life that lasts, for a life that comes again after death.

This is the life that we imagine for Russell Hentz, and for all who wonder how they might make through this interruption and so many others that weigh heavily on us.

The God revealed in Scripture, the God given witness to by those who are our ancestors in faith, the God made known in Jesus the Messiah always and continually brings the word "again" to a grieving community.

The community was banished from its homeland when Isaiah's purpose was to encourage the exiles that God's brightness would shine through them, even when all seemed dark.

The community was walking through threats from enemies when the Psalmist declares God as shepherd who provides protection and comfort, and a feast, and a blessing of touch, anointing with oil, cleansing and fragrant.

And then there was Martha, and Mary, in their grief over their brother Lazarus, who had died. This is the gospel story that we tell today. The circumstances of the death are not told. The grief however is palpable. It even says later in the story that Jesus felt this death of his friend in his gut, and that Jesus shed tears. Jesus, too, was acquainted with the interruption.

If we have been following Jesus in the gospel we would know that at the very beginning of John's gospel, the poem that describes Jesus as the Word and with God from the beginning says this *In him was life, and the light was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.*

Now, in today's story, more than halfway into the Gospel and processing to Jesus' death on the cross, death interrupts Jesus' ministry. Martha gives herself over to Jesus when they meet in grief. Jesus says that word "again" to Lazarus' sister. Even more, he announces himself as the divine one sent by God who is the resurrection and the life. This is a full life, the life that last, life that comes again after death

It's as if Jesus lit up the place of death for his friend Martha. And if we follow Jesus all the way to the end of the Gospel, we will see that even in his own dying, Jesus opens up a path to new life. As he dies on the cross, it says *he bowed his head and gave up his spirit*, do you think that's the same spirit which breathes new life, which in the word "again" will claim Russell, will gather us all, will hold us all in God's embrace?

I began by saying that death interrupts life. While this may be true, I'd also like to say that as far as God's concerned, as far as Jesus is concerned, as far as the Spirit is concerned, life is given in the midst of death.

We who are here lighting this Paschal or resurrection candle, who offer our hands to love a grieving family, also share bread and wine as a feast of new life. This table prepared in the presence of death offers Jesus as resurrection, entering into a broken humanity. More than words, this act of eating and drinking in remembrance of Christ crucified and risen makes us while broken, whole, in the midst of death, alive.

God, you claimed Russell your beloved child in baptism, and surrounded him with the love of family. As Jesus continues to offer your new life, your full life, your life that lasts, help us in the midst of grief to claim that life today and in the days to come. Thank you for your warm embrace that is extended through our gestures of care and ritual of communion. Stay close to those who feel lost, and speak to us through song and prayer, conversation, and your Word. In Christ, your Son, our Savior. Amen

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