

"Being Gathered in the Hallowed Places" -- Genesis 49:1 & 33

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church -- November 30, 1998

Memorial Service for Etta Haussler

Pastor Michael L. McCoy

Grace, mercy and peace to you in the Name of the Lord our God. Amen.

Dear Dena and the other members of the Etta Haussler Family,

There is a gathering in which we know that the ground beneath our feet is holy and those who are permitted into that consecrated place are privileged and will never forget the occasion. The hallowed place is that area around the deathbed of an aged child of God. Throughout history, generation after generation has experienced those special, yet rare, times when an old believing man or an elderly faithful woman speaks to his or her loved ones from the deathbed. Perhaps you recall the tune and the stanzas of a favorite hymn of Christendom,

- *Oh, for a faith that will not shrink,*
- *Tho' pressed by many a foe;*
- *That will not tremble on the brink,*
- *Of poverty or woe.*
- *A faith that keeps the narrow way,*
- *Till life's last spark is fled,*
- *And with a pure and heavenly ray,*
- *Lights up the dying bed.*
- *(The Lutheran Hymnal, #396, st. 1 & 5)*

Whether an old man thousands of years ago or an aged woman four days ago, what great witnesses to the truth are able to be proclaimed by the faint breaths of the physically frail who are, at the same time, exceptionally strong in the Spirit. We are honored guests to hear specific words directed to us at that time when the soul is about to depart and be with the Lord God Almighty.

Thus, the ancient custom took place once again when this aged, faithful one was about to fall asleep in the Lord. Life on this earth was nearly over and everyone knew it - including the one about to die. There was no terrifying fear in that tired voice ... no frantic searching in those dimming eyes. But why should there be? The Lord God had had this one in the palm of His hand from infancy. Of course, everyone knew it was time and everyone was expecting the call at any moment. The family members gathered together and stood nearby ... outside the doorway and its tent-like curtain ... each one of them and all of them were waiting to hear a final word. Well, what exactly did they hear from that faithful old man?

Please listen to our sermon text for this day, Genesis 49, verses 1 & 33, doing so under the theme of:

... *Being Gathered in the Hallowed Places*

Then Jacob called his sons, and said, "Gather yourselves together that I may tell you what shall befall you in days to come." ... When Jacob finishing charging his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed, and breathed his last, and was gathered to his people.

Thus far the Word of the Lord our God.

1. Being Gathered at the Deathbed

Jacob was about to depart this world and moved by the Holy Spirit, he desired to speak to each one of his sons ... about who they were and what was to befall them after he had breathed his last. So they gathered together to listen to their father and hear what he was going to tell them. Jacob spoke the truth in love with words appropriate for each one of his sons.

Some were hard words to hear, especially to those who had departed from God's will. He addressed Simeon and Levi, speaking about anger and the consequences of such sinful outbursts and lack of self-control. Some of the old man's words were comforting. To Judah was the promise that one of his descendants would be the promised Savior -- the Seed of the woman Who would crush the head of the devil ... the King Who would rule by His grace. This was the promise of the Messiah, the Christ, the Lord Jesus, Who, according to His human nature, is descended from Judah, Jacob, Isaac and Abraham.

Jacob wanted his sons to know that the Lord was not only the God of Abraham and Isaac, but also his God, the God of Jacob. He wanted his sons to believe in and trust and confess that the Lord was their God as well. Etta wanted the same thing for you, Dena and for you, her grandchildren and for you, her great-grandchildren. So, on her deathbed last week she was able to speak to you personally and sincerely; and what you heard her say should be carefully thought about, considered and cherished.

I know that I will remember some of the last words I heard her speak. A week ago yesterday I went to visit her in the nursing home. She was a bit confused and though she recognized me as her pastor, she was not sure exactly where she was. After a moment of foggy discussion, I decided to lead her to an area of familiarity. I asked her if she wanted to receive the Lord's Supper. She quickly indicated that she did and as we went through the communion liturgy she was back in church and on the familiar ground of the Word. For years she had heard and spoken the same words of the church's liturgy with Clarence as they gathered together in the House of the Lord.

Last Sunday, in the midst of the confusion of her mind, the uncertainty of where she was, and the deterioration of her physical health, she found her comfort in the Lord and His Word. Here was focus, clarity and foundation for Etta as she reclined on her deathbed -- to receive the very Body of the Christ Who was born of the virgin named Mary -- to receive the true Blood of Jesus Which was shed on the sin-atonement cross -- to hear those words once more ...*Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy Word, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people, a Light to lighten the Gentiles and the Glory of Thy people Israel (Luke 2:29-32).*

The hymn writer stated it like this ...

- *"My hope is built on nothing less,*
- *Than Jesus' Blood and righteousness;*
- *I dare not trust the sweetest frame,*
- *But wholly lean on Jesus' Name.*
- *On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand,*
- *All other ground is sinking sand"*
- *(TLH #370, st. 1).*

That, dear people, is a confession of the truth in which one may certainly live, but more importantly, it is a confession of the faith in which one may die.

Parents truly want what is best for their children, no matter how old the children get. Even though some of Jacob's sons had acted contrary to the will of their God and of their father, Jacob wanted what was best for his sons. So he spoke to them as they gathered about him. *This is what their father said to them as he blessed them, blessing each with the blessing suitable to him (Genesis 49:28).*

Etta also wanted what was best for her family. She prayed that you would believe that God sent His Son to be born for you ... that Jesus took upon Himself all your sins when He died on the cross ... and that our Lord's Resurrection on Easter morning is Good News that is able to give you hope on a day like this when we were gathered together at a grave site on the bench and as we are now gathered together here in this holy place. God wanted the best for you and so He sent His Son. Etta wanted the best for you and so she remembered you in her prayers and spoke words of encouragement to you. I know that it was a great joy for her that some of you had never departed from the faith and a greater joy that others of you had returned.

So Jacob, the aged patriarch, said to his son, Joseph, "Behold, I am about to die, but God will be with you" (Genesis 49:21). Those are words of faith from one who believes and trusts in God's promises ... the belief that says, "Look, I am on my deathbed. I am very tired and I won't be able to last much longer. Behold, I am about to die and I won't be with you. I won't be at the family gatherings. But remember that God will be with you. He has loved you with an ever-lasting love. Don't turn your back on Him. Rather, know that the Lord is God and we are His people. Remain faithful unto death and you shall be given the crown of life. I know that my Redeemer lives; and, He is your Redeemer as well."

2. the gathering of God's people

The first gathering was at the deathbed to hear the words of faith. The second is the gathering of God's people. Permit me to explain that. The second part of our sermon text says, *When Jacob finishing charging his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed, and breathed his last, and was gathered to his people.* This refers to the truth that when people like Jacob and Clarence and Etta breath their last in this world, they are gathered together as a part of God's people. That is what the third reading was all about. The Apostle John beholds the scene in heaven and sees those who have died in faith. Listen to that description once more. It is magnificent.

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne,

and to the Lamb!" And all the angels stood round the throne and round the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen."

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?" I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the Blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night within His temple; and He Who sits upon the throne will shelter them with His presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and He will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 7:9-17).

But this description is only for those who are God's people ... for those who believe that Jesus died for their sins, who trust that Jesus rose from the dead on the first Easter morning, and who confess, by the power of the Holy Spirit, that Jesus is Lord. For those who do, there will be a family reunion in heaven. It will not be the reunion of a small, individual family, but rather, the grand reunion of the Family of God. If God has given you the gift of faith and worked faith in your heart as He did for Etta; in other words, if you are one of God's people then you are encouraged to remain steadfast in the Christian faith. If you are not, then this is your invitation to believe the truth about your Savior.

Dear people, in the *Lord's Prayer* we pray, *but deliver us from evil*. In *Luther's Small Catechism* we have memorized what that means:

"We pray in this petition, as the sum of all, that our Father in heaven would deliver us from every evil of body and soul, property and honor, and finally, when our last hour has come, grant us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this vale of tears to Himself in heaven."

That prayer was answered for Etta. Last Thursday, Thanksgiving Day, those who visited with her were able to speak with her and to listen to her. One by one the family members did so. One by one they left her bedside that evening. Then alone in her room ... alone except for her Lord and her self, she did as Jacob did so long ago ... she drew up her feet into the bed, and breathed her last, and was gathered to her people. Amen.