

"The Desire to Depart and be with Christ"

Philippians 1:19-24

14 February Anno Domini 2002

The First Thursday of Lent
Sermon for the Divine Service of the Word
in Memory of

William E. Nichols

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Emmett, Idaho
Pastor Michael L. McCoy

Dear Kay, Karen, Bill, the other members of the Nichols Family, the friends and neighbors of Bill, as well as Bill's fellow members of the Family of God here at Our Redeemer Lutheran Church:

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

If the grace and mercy of God permit, there comes an extraordinary time, or even one more such time or two, when a man is given the opportunity to reflect on the life he has lived to date and the eternity that awaits. Certainly we all think of such times periodically, but usually not when that unnatural event called death stares us in the face. Those critical moments or hours or days - when the Christian's death is at hand - provide sobering and joyful opportunities to reflect on this life, on this death and on the life to be lived forever, as well as give opportunities to be a witness to the certain and sure hope that the Christian has of being with the Lord in Paradise.

One such man had that extended occasion to speak and communicate with loved ones. His words communicated the truth concerning the life that Christ had given to him and called him to live in this world and especially, the Life that Jesus has earned and prepared for him in Heaven. Faced with the possibility of departing this life at any moment, he sent greetings to the Church and sought the prayers of a congregation. It is most certainly true that he was not afraid to die. In fact, he looked forward to the departure, not because he desired death, but because he longed to be with the Lord. For him, death was the departure of this life that led to the unending Life in Paradise with the One God ... the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. We marvel at such men and women and youth and children who have been given such a faith as this ... one that seeks to be with the Lord.

Under the theme of "The Desire to Depart and Be with Christ," we will pursue this line of faith based upon the sermon text for this Divine Service of the Word. The Apostle Paul writes in Philippians 1:19-24:

"For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If it is to be life in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart

and be with Christ, for that is far better."

Thus far the Word of the LORD our God.

Dearly beloved, we hear these words of Paul written when in prison and they are striking ... even shocking! Who says such words? Who has the conviction to speak like this and really to mean it? Well, not only the Apostle Paul, but also a man named William Nichols.

Two or three days prior to falling asleep in Christ, Bill said something immensely profound and quite common among the faithful. We were conversing about the promise of Paradise and how he looked forward to being there with the Lord. He made mention of how God had made the promise of eternal life and heaven, and how God could be trusted to fulfill His Word to grant these blessings. Then Bill said, "The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not want" (Psalm 23:1).

What does this mean? Well, the LORD is God the Father Who looked upon a world fallen due to sin ... upon all people heading for a date with destruction ... and sent His Son to be the Savior. "For God so loved the world that He gave His Only-Begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have Eternal Life" (John 3:16). Thus, regarding a Savior, you may say, along with Bill, "The LORD is my Shepherd,' and I am not lacking and I shall not want." Indeed, the LORD is God the Son Who came to atone for, that is, to pay the price for all sins of all people of all times ... all of your sins included. Thus, regarding the forgiveness of all your sins, you may say, along with Bill, "The LORD is my Shepherd,' and I am not lacking and I shall not want." Indeed, the LORD is God the Holy Spirit Who works faith in the hearts of people who hear this Good News of Jesus' Life, Death and Resurrection, and continues to grant them trust in this message of peace with God. Thus, regarding this gracious, God-given gift of faith, you may say, along with Bill, "The LORD is my Shepherd,' and I am not lacking and I shall not want."

Several times in the past weeks Bill desired and received the Lord's Supper wherein he received the forgiveness of sins and the strengthening of his faith. Following such faithful communing, Bill heard the Word that he had sung so many times in the past: "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy Word."

This One God ... this Living LORD has provided an accomplished salvation and the only thing that prevents anyone from having peace with God now and Life with the LORD forever is unbelief. The sins of your past, those of the present, even those that you will commit have found satisfaction two thousand years ago when Jesus the Christ took your place under the wrath of God. In the Word, we hear of His Body broken for you, of His Blood poured out for you, of His Life given for you when He died in your place on the cross. Anyone who believes this message has eternal life and whether that individual lives or dies, he or she will be with the Lord in Paradise. And in this life, such a one as this may say, "The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not want."

So I asked Bill, "Is this what you want me to tell the people?"- meaning you here this day seated here in this place and now hearing this sermon. "Is this what you want me to tell the people?" Bill's reply? "Absolutely!"

Bill often gave such one word responses. There were several times in the last few weeks when he answered a question with single syllable responses. For example, in reply to the following, Bill stated a firm "Yes."

He listened to the words confessed by so many throughout the centuries and around the world:

"O Almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended Thee and justly deserved Thy temporal and eternal punishment. But I am heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them, and I pray Thee of Thy boundless mercy and for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of Thy beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to be gracious and merciful to me, a poor, sinful being. 'Is this your confession, Bill? If so, declare it by saying, "Yes."'"

Bill's reply was a certain, "Yes."

Then did Bill hear the Word of the Lord announced unto him, namely, "You are forgiven of 'all your sins in the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Ghost.'" No wonder that he could be at such peace and commend his body and soul, his moments and days, into the hands of the Living Lord. On Thursday, a week ago today, Bill understood that the moment of His departure to be with Christ was at hand. His eyes were in heaven as he confidently waited for the Lord to take him home. So, when Bill was asked if it was his desire to depart and be with Christ, he answered, "Absolutely."

The next day, last Friday, Bill felt a little stronger and made specific mention to Kay saying something like this. "You know, yesterday I told pastor that I was going to be with the Lord very soon. But I feel better today and it must be that the Lord still has something for me to do here." What Bill said reminds us of what the Apostle Paul wrote: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If it is to be life in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two."

Bill's physical strength improved. He rallied and a marked change in his condition could be noted. As he had done so often before; in fact, on every other occasion, he improved physically; so much so that he became determined that his work here was not quite finished. Surely there was some fruitful labor that the Lord wanted done.

Hours later, on the next day of the week, that is, on Saturday, the Seventh Day of the week ... that is, the Sabbath Day, the Day of Rest ... the Day of the week when God rested from His work of Creation, the Day of the week when Christ rested in the tomb from His work of Redemption on Good Friday, Bill was called home. He departed and was with Christ.

This day, assembled here in this holy place, you have heard the Word of God intended for all people and we are privileged to hear this Good News. "My desire is to depart and be with Christ." These words, ones written by the apostle centuries ago ... ones spoken by a faithful man days ago, are repeated for you, "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have Life in His Name" (John 20:31).

Thus Bill is with the LORD God and awaits the day when those who believe in Christ and trust in the LORD will be with him in Paradise. Bill and Paul and all the faithful who have departed this life are with Christ and await the Day of the Resurrection when body and soul are reunited. Then will all the faithful be together with the LORD. What a reunion that will be for the Family of God! Until that Day, you and I are called to believe in the Lord and remain faithful. He has given us the means to

believe such and continue steadfast in the faith. God has given His Word and granted faith to trust this Good News.

Dearly beloved, we hear these words of Paul written when in prison and we hear these words of Bill spoken when on his deathbed. They are stunning words of determination by men of faith, for who among us is ready to say, "my desire is to depart and be with Christ"? But really, who among us is facing death? All of us, you reply! Ahh, correct, for this is most certainly true. But who among us is expecting to die in the next moment ... or the next hour ... or the next day or two? Probably no one here. But is it not possible for any one of us here? Ahh, yes, this also is most certainly true.

As you consider these truths, listen once again to the Word of God written by the Apostle Paul to the congregation in Philippi, a few verses of which has this sermon been based and the Word that you are encouraged to ponder for as many years or months or days or moments that the LORD God grants you here in this life:

"For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If it is to be life in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better." Amen.