

“Death, I Hear You Callin’”

Genesis 23:1-20

November 6th, 2016

The Viet Nam Veteran’s Memorial is striking for its simplicity. Etched in a black granite wall are the names of 58,307 Americans who died in the conflict (as of Memorial Day 2015).

Since its opening in 1982, the stark monument has stirred deep emotions. Some visitors walk its length slowly, reverently, and without pause. Others stop before certain names, remembering their son or sweetheart or fellow warrior, wiping away tears, tracing the names with their fingers.

For three Viet Nam veterans – Robert Bedker, Willard Craig, and Darrell Lausch – a visit to the memorial must be especially poignant, for they can walk up to the long ebony wall and find their own names carved in the stone. Because of data-coding errors, each of them was incorrectly listed “killed in action.”

As a pastor, you might imagine I spend a good deal of time in cemeteries. I find them to be among the most tranquil places, so I visit them regularly. Almost always, I find myself drawn to headstones to learn something about the deceased buried near them.

This past Monday as I walked through the Aledo Cemetery, I was struck by the length of time that has passed since some friends and acquaintances have died. I also noted how little can be said about the deceased on a headstone; I found myself wanting to know more about many of them. And, as I often take in, I reflect upon how inescapable death is – the number of headstones in a cemetery only increases with time. Death will call each and every one of us unless Jesus comes back first.

For sure, we don’t like to talk about death, or even think about it. As such, we don’t plan well for it, either. My experience reveals that many people die without leaving burial or funeral instructions for family members, or even, as was the case with my father, leaving a will. As your pastor, dear ones, I wish to encourage you to leave details behind for us, because as a member of this congregation, we will surely miss you after God calls you home. But, we also want to remember you well – plan to have your funeral service here at the church building – have a visitation for the benefit of your surviving family members so the public can join in comforting your family and congregation. After all, it may be one of the few times some of your loved ones will ever be confronted with the gospel – their need for salvation in trusting Jesus Christ.

The passage of Scripture before us this morning details the first burial recorded in the Bible – the death of Sarah. She is the first of Abraham’s immediate family to be laid to rest, and she is the first matriarch of the Hebrew people. For sure, it is responsible and spiritually mature for us to ponder our own demise in light of Sarah’s death. The end point of life this side of eternity for the believer in Jesus Christ is that we die well, even as we are to live well. As the Preacher reminds us in **Ecclesiastes 7:2**, “Better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that *is* the end of all men; and the living will take *it* to heart.”

Genesis 23:1-20:

“Sarah lived one hundred and twenty-seven years; *these were* the years of the life of Sarah. ² So Sarah died in Kirjath Arba (that *is*, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.

³Then Abraham stood up from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Heth, saying, ⁴“I *am* a foreigner and a visitor among you. Give me property for a burial place among you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.”

⁵And the sons of Heth answered Abraham, saying to him, ⁶“Hear us, my lord: You *are* a mighty prince among us; bury your dead in the choicest of our burial places. None of us will withhold from you his burial place, that you may bury your dead.”

⁷Then Abraham stood up and bowed himself to the people of the land, the sons of Heth. ⁸And he spoke with them, saying, “If it is your wish that I bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and meet with Ephron the son of Zohar for me, ⁹that he may give me the cave of Machpelah which he has, which *is* at the end of his field. Let him give it to me at the full price, as property for a burial place among you.”

¹⁰Now Ephron dwelt among the sons of Heth; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the presence of the sons of Heth, all who entered at the gate of his city, saying, ¹¹“No, my lord, hear me: I give you the field and the cave that *is* in it; I give it to you in the presence of the sons of my people. I give it to you. Bury your dead!”

¹²Then Abraham bowed himself down before the people of the land; ¹³and he spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, “If you *will give it*, please hear me. I will give you money for the field; take *it* from me and I will bury my dead there.”

¹⁴And Ephron answered Abraham, saying to him, ¹⁵“My lord, listen to me; the land *is worth* four hundred shekels of silver. What *is* that between you and me? So bury your dead.” ¹⁶And Abraham listened to Ephron; and Abraham weighed out the silver for Ephron which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, currency of the merchants.

¹⁷So the field of Ephron which *was* in Machpelah, which *was* before Mamre, the field and the cave which *was* in it, and all the trees that *were* in the field, which *were* within all the surrounding borders, were deeded ¹⁸to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the sons of Heth, before all who went in at the gate of his city.

¹⁹And after this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah, before Mamre (that *is*, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. ²⁰So the field and the cave that *is* in it were deeded to Abraham by the sons of Heth as property for a burial place.”

I'll explore three primary points in today's passage:

MP 1 – Sarah's Death (v. 1 & 2);

MP 2 – Sarah's Tomb (v. 3-18);

MP 3 – Sarah's Burial (v. 19-20)

Verses 1 and 2 mention the end of Sarah's earthly life. We note first in verse 1 that Sarah died at the age of 127 years. Given that she was 90 years of age when Isaac was born, that means she would have lived until Isaac had reached the age of 37. 127 years; that's a long time!

<p><u>127 years ago</u> – November 1889. It was 24 years after the end of the American Civil War; 19 years before the Chicago Cubs last World Series championship (that is until 3 days ago!) November 1889 was when North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, and Washington were admitted to the union. 15 potatoes cost 10¢; a dozen eggs were 26 cents; a steak was 20¢. That's been a long time ago!</p>
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Even though she was the mother of the child of promise, Sarah's life here on earth came to an end. So it is the lot of each of us. The effects of sin – our own, the sin of others, and the sin of the world – break us down; from the moment of our physical birth, we begin the long slow process of dying. According to **Psalm 90:10**, “The days of our lives *are* seventy years; and if by reason of strength *they are* eighty years...” Sarah was far beyond that range, and some hearing my

voice are beyond that range, and others of us may not reach that range. It behooves you to get right with God by trusting in Christ if you are not presently a Christian, and if you are, your life must continue to bring glory to God.

We also note Abraham's grief for his wife. Verse 2 says that he "weep(ed) for her." God's people are not exempt from the miseries of this life; many of you know that full well. "Just because you're a Christian does not mean you don't mourn and weep over your loss, over the spouse who's no longer at your side or the child who no longer sits on your knee. And sometimes it may come in waves." (Davis, 144-145)

Author Edgar Jackson poignantly describes grief this way:

Grief is the young widow trying to raise her three children alone.

Grief is the man so filled with shocked uncertainty and confusion that he strikes out at the nearest person.

Grief is a mother walking daily to a nearby cemetery to stand quietly and alone a few minutes before going about the tasks of the day. She knows that a part of her is in the cemetery.

Grief is the silent, knife-like terror and sadness that comes a hundred times a day, when you start to speak to someone who is no longer there.

Grief is the emptiness that comes when you eat alone after eating with another for many years.

Grief is teaching yourself to go to bed without saying good night to the one who has died.

Grief is the helpless wishing that things were different when you know that they are not and never will be again.

Grief is a whole cluster of adjustments, apprehensions, and uncertainties that strike life in its forward progress and make it difficult to redirect the energies of life.

When our friends and loved ones suffer devastation or loss, *how are we to respond?* Our verse of the week gives us a clue – turn in your worship bulletin to the bottom right hand side as you hold the bulletin open, and let's recite reference, verse, and reference aloud together:

Romans 12:15 – "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep." **Romans 12:15.**

As we minister to others who are suffering, it would do us well to remember that grief does not affect everyone the same way. A certain amount of time passing does not erase the loss from life. For a long time, the ache never leaves. Much, much later you may sense you're getting a handle on your grief, and while you're standing in worship singing a particular song, something sneaks up on you and turns on the water-works. *Does faith make a difference?* Yes, it does. But faith doesn't isolate us from sorrow – in fact, the deeper the love, the closer the relation, the more severe the grief may be. We must love each other through the tough times and beyond. And, we must not force the expectation of how we responded in similar grief upon others.

"Not to mourn is a great failure, but to mourn indefinitely is equally an error. Life must go on at some point. Therefore, the proper way for a Christian to handle someone else's death is to mourn, then to get on with the business of living. Abraham did this." (Boice, 712) **Sarah had died**, but there was no place to bury her. He needed to find a place to lay her body to rest. The largest part of this passage focuses on **Abraham purchasing a plot** in which to bury his wife. As a stranger and an alien in the land (even though God had promised to give it, it still remained in the hands of the occupants), Abraham bartered with the Hittites and a man named Ephron.

Upon first read, it may look as if Ephron were a man of integrity, but we see that he tried to get Abraham to buy more than the cave he wanted to bury Sarah in; Ephron tried to get Abraham to buy the entire field, as well. He made sure Abraham knew full well the sale price of the field – 400 shekels of silver.

The point of this story is that Abraham went through these elaborate negotiations to purchase a possession in which to bury his dead. Burial usually took place in one's native land. It seems that Abraham was making this portion of the land his ancestral home. There would be no going back to Haran after this. The last two verses highlight **Sarah's burial** in the beautiful field.

“Abraham was buying Ephron's field not only to bury Sarah but also to express his confidence in God's promises concerning the land and the future.” (Boice, 714) This plot of land would not only hold the remains of Sarah, but of Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Leah, and Jacob as well. Warren Wiersbe notes, “Genesis ends with a full tomb, but the four Gospels end with an empty tomb!” (

And, that tells us how this passage touches on the gospel message. Going back to the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, when they ate of the fruit of the Tree of Good and Evil after God instructed that they not do so, sin has infiltrated every part of our being. We were conceived in sin, and born in sin. We were wholly unable (and even unwilling) to be released from the grip of sin in our lives before Jesus came into our lives.

God the Son, Jesus Christ, came to earth to pay sin's price. He was arrested, tried, sentenced to death, died, was buried, and, on the third day, He rose again from the dead! Jesus has conquered death and taken away its sting. Because of His victory, we need not fear death or the grave!

In the book *Is It Real When it Doesn't Work?* Doug Murren and Barb Shurin recount:

Toward the end of the 19th century, Swedish chemist Alfred Nobel awoke one morning to read his own obituary in the local newspaper: “Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, who died yesterday, devised a way for more people to be killed in a war than ever before, and he died a very rich man.”

Actually, it was Alfred's older brother who had died; a newspaper reporter had bungled the epitaph.

But the account had a profound effect on Nobel. He decided he wanted to be known for something other than developing the means to kill people efficiently and for amassing a fortune in the process. So he initiated the Nobel Prize, the award for scientists and writers who foster peace.

Nobel said, “Every man ought to have the chance to correct his epitaph in midstream and write a new one.”

Friends, you are here today and have been given another opportunity to align your life to Jesus' life. You have the opportunity to correct the epitaph of your life and write a new one. *Will you do as God commands and repent of your sin and embrace Jesus Christ as Master and Lord?* Not to do so is to waste your life, no matter how big your financial portfolio, or how

many vehicles you own, or how big your house is, or how many of those you have. It comes down to who you worship and serve. It's scandalous to live any other way.

There was a very cautious man
Who never laughed or played.
He never risked, he never tired
He never sang or prayed.
And when one day he passed away
His insurance was denied
For since he never really lived
They claimed he never died.