

Title: Planning for a Graceful Exit  
Date: 5/14/2023 (Easter 6, Year A)  
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church  
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)  
Readings: [Acts 17:22-31](#); [1 Peter 3:13-22](#); [John 14:15-21](#); [Psalm 66:7-18](#)  
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/lv-7AboiXfA?t=1153>

O God, in you we live and move and have our being: we humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**<sup>1</sup>

This is the Collect for Guidance from the Book of Common Prayer. I really **really** love this phrase, “in you we live and move and have our being.” It comes from the Book of Acts, from the passage we heard today.

These words feel like a prayer and a reminder, a statement of fact and an aspiration, a hope for things to come. These words would make a pretty solid foundation for a spiritual life, for living stones built into a refuge and a stronghold.

“In you, we live and move and have our being”

Hold on to these words. We’re going to come back to them.

First, I want to talk about the gospel. As I read it, it reminded me so much of the homilies I preach at funerals. As the saying goes, every preacher has **one** sermon in them, maaaybe even as many as three. The passages we preach on may change, but the underlying message tends to stay the same. When it comes to funeral homilies, we might have just one.

In mine, I remind the people attending the service that the story of the person we are there to honor doesn’t end with their death. The world may no longer see them, but **we will**. The world may not be able to receive the spirit of the truths they taught us through their thoughts, words and deeds, throughout the whole of their lives, but **we can**, because we have seen and known them.

Maybe I have funerals on my mind because we talked about burial rites in Adult Ed last week.

Maybe I have funerals on my mind because today we’re talking about a great resource called Planning for a Graceful Exit.<sup>2</sup>

Last week we looked at prayers and rituals such as funerals and vigils and healing services. They give us words when it’s hard to find words of our own, when leaning on words that generations of Christians have taken comfort in can help us feel less alone. They provide a container that holds us and our struggles and our grief. This week, we’re looking at practical resources for planning for the end of life.

Planning ahead for that transition is such a gift to our loved ones. It's one or two or three fewer things that will stress them out as they grieve. They can focus on being present to one another and sharing memories of us instead of running around and asking questions like "Where are those bank statements?" or "What would they have wanted?" because the answers are already there, on paper and in digital form.

Planning ahead for that transition is also a gift to ourselves. We can take comfort that we are able to care for our loved ones even when we're not physically present. It's a chance to reflect on what we have done and what we have left undone, so we have a better sense of what we want to do with the time we have left and how we might live so we die not with the most toys, but with the fewest regrets. This doesn't just apply to people of a certain age or income bracket; this applies to all of us. Baptisms, funerals, weddings—those are all opportunities to ask ourselves whether everything is in order, whether this is the life we want to live.

During the English Civil War, theologian Jeremy Taylor wrote a pair of books, *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying*. In the dedication to *Holy Dying*, he wrote, and here I've paraphrased and updated the language:

It is a great art to die well, an art to be learnt by all people while we are in good health, by those who can discourse and consider, by those whose understanding and acts of reason are not affected by fear or pains: and as the greatest part of death is preceded by the preceding years of our life, so also in those years are the greatest preparation for it; and he that only starts to prepares for death before his last sickness, is like him, that begins to study philosophy right before a public debate.<sup>3</sup>

So, dying well starts with living well; the practice of dying well starts with the practice of living well.

You might be wondering why I'm choosing to talk about death at this moment of the church year. Don't we save solemn and depressing topics for the season of Lent? It's spring. It's Easter. It's the season for new life. Why are we talking about death?

The fifty days of Easter, the season of new life, started with death. This Thursday is Ascension Day, and it marks the day Jesus left the disciples for the second time. For all intents and purposes, Jesus is dying again, as in he will not be physically here on earth. Once again, the disciples are left to their own devices.

Yet, they are not **really** alone. Today's gospel takes us back to the story of the last supper in the gospel according to John. After washing the feet of his disciples, Jesus launches into what we call the Farewell Discourse (Jn 14-17). Jesus knows they aren't really picking up what he's putting down and that these words won't really mean anything to them until after his crucifixion. Yet that doesn't keep him from preparing them for his death; he is planning for his own graceful exit.

He lays the groundwork for his own graceful exit by imparting some important truths, and he restates them in **all** kinds of ways so that his words will leave an impression on the disciples.

The Farewell Discourse starts with the passage we heard last week. Jesus is preparing a place for us, and to get there, all we need to do is follow Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life. Then it goes into this complicated bit about the relationship between God the Father and Jesus and us.

“Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father“ (Jn 14:1-14).

Verses like these twist my brain into a pretzel. These are the part of the gospel according to John that I really struggle with. They feel like a snake eating its own tail.

Even though there are just three “characters”, God, Jesus, and us, I always feel like I need one of those boards on crime shows where there are pictures of the suspects and victims and bits of evidence, and arrows illustrating the connection between them.

In this case there would be arrows going in all kinds of directions, and not thin flimsy ones but a **thick solid one** showing the strength of the connection. My brain ties itself into knots to understand these relationships as I try to figure out what this means on a practical, day to day level.

I don’t want to be like the audience that Paul is speaking to in Acts. The writer of Acts says of them, “Now all the Athenians and foreigners living there would spend their time in telling or hearing something new” (Acts 17:21).

I don’t want **my** engagement with the words of scripture to stay at the level of telling or hearing.

So, it helps that this week Jesus gets a little more specific. The work he calls us to do is to follow his commandments. Though he doesn’t get more specific here, I hear that as referring to the Two Great Commandments, to love God with our whole heart and body and mind and to love our neighbors as ourselves. I’d also include the third great commandment, which he gave them on this very night, to love one another as he has loved us.

We follow his commandments not so that we can earn our salvation, but because we recognize that Jesus is in his Father, and we are in him, and he is in us. Following his commandments is **not the cause** but **the effect**. It is our response to recognizing that we have already been saved; it comes from remembering that we have already been saved.

We know how to follow his commandments because, like the disciples, we have not been left orphaned. The world no longer sees Jesus AND **we** still see Jesus, in one another and in everyone that follows his commandments.

The Spirit of truth abides with us and is in us, as long as we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear. Some cannot receive the Spirit of truth but we can and we will, if we learn to see and know the presence of the Holy Spirit in and among us, if we speak that longing to God, “O God, in you we live and move and have our being.”

This is not an easy path. God doesn’t promise easy. God promises life. The version of the Bible we normally read, the NRSV, Jn 14:19 has Jesus telling us “because I live, you also will live” (Jn 14:19) The version of the Bible called Message has a slightly different emphasis, “because I am alive and you are about to come alive.”

As we talk and think about death, may it also point us to a way that will help us come even more fully alive.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Collect for Guidance (BCP 100)

<sup>2</sup> [https://aa86e41e7d951355383b-cb342165bfeaa4f2927aec8e5d7de41f.ssl.cf2.rackcdn.com/uploaded/p/0e4654956\\_1447175007\\_planning-for-a-graceful-exit.pdf](https://aa86e41e7d951355383b-cb342165bfeaa4f2927aec8e5d7de41f.ssl.cf2.rackcdn.com/uploaded/p/0e4654956_1447175007_planning-for-a-graceful-exit.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, Jeremy. *Holy Dying*. p cccxix