



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

Dealing Creatively With Death
A presentation to the Rector's Forum by
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I have been here many times, and I am glad to be back. This Interfaith Center to Reverse the Arms Race is dear to my heart. You used to call yourselves "Riverside Church West," but after a while you began to call us "Interfaith East." When I walked into the courtyard here and saw those wonderful banners, and all those folks hawking their religious wares, I said to my wife, "Gee, this reminds me of Riverside." She said, "I was just thinking Vermont." Either way, it is a great compliment. And to see so many friends here! Clarke Oler and I sang in the Yale Glee Club. You have to forgive us these things. There are not too many Yalies who are part of the solution.

My remarks this morning will have the questionable virtue of considerable spontaneity. I have been flat out on SANE/FREEZE business, and last night, after giving several talks in San Diego, I was supposed to fly back, but the plane didn't fly. So we had to drive back all night, and my friend Madison Shockley over here had me preaching at 8:00 at the Brookings AME Church in Los Angeles. So I haven't had time to dedicate my self properly to the subject matter at hand. Let me see what I can do, and then we can have some conversation about it.

When George told me he wanted me to talk about grieving and creative responses to death, I said, "What has that got to do with Palm Sunday?" As I understand the message of Palm Sunday, it is that there are far more important tragedies than the tragedy of death, and there are no more important victories than the triumph of love. The only person who weeps on Palm Sunday – and this is the most poignant part of the story – is Christ Jesus himself. As he drew near to the city, he wept, and said, "Would that even now you knew the things that make for peace."³ He wasn't even weeping for himself, knowing full well what was going to happen before the week was out, but rather he was weeping for those who, though cheering him on Palm Sunday, would be shouting "Crucify him!" come the end of the week.

So I wasn't quite sure how George fit this topic into Palm Sunday. But George's whisper is my command. So I will respond to his request. I think that one of the reasons he wanted me to talk about it was because, like a few of you here, I lost a son – now, five years ago. Let me ask you, how many of you have lost a son or a daughter? Put your hands up. See, the number is always much larger than we think. What of course is so hard about that is that I lost my mother the month before. I must say that losing my son within a month made it very hard to grieve for my mother. I still don't feel, nearly six years later, that I have properly grieved over the passing of my ninety-year-old mother, even though she died in the most wonderful way at the age of ninety. People have a right to die, my word! There was no tragedy there, but her death came as a period after a very long and eloquent sentence; whereas Alex's death, like the death of the

children of the rest of you, comes as a period even before the sentence is underway. It is a very wrong feeling.

The first feeling we all have is that the world has nothing to give like that which it takes away. It is absolutely overwhelming. The people who try to comfort you are the worst people you want around, because you experience their comfort as coming from people who will not enter into your sorrow. The most you can ever do for somebody who is overwhelmed by grief probably is just to touch them. You don't have to say anything. It is kind of like going to a dentist. Nowadays dentists are softies; they give you so many Novocains that you can't feel a thing. But those of you who are my age will remember the old days, when we didn't have those things or didn't want to use them. You would be in absolute misery, and then suddenly the dentist's finger would graze your cheek. It was solace itself! Just a touch, when you are in enormous pain. I believe the same thing works when somebody is in real sorrow. Just touch. Just say, "I'm going to sit here but I won't say a thing."

Once unbearable grief becomes bearable sorrow, and you have to start putting things into perspective, then there are things you can begin to think about and say about grief. But before getting into that, I don't want to leave Jesus weeping over the city. I have said that there are greater tragedies than the City of Death. What I had in mind was all the little deaths that we die because we don't have Jesus' courage. Courage is the one virtue that makes all other virtues possible. When you go to church on Palm Sunday, which is always one of the great feast days, it is so terrific to think that he could have stayed in Galilee, where things were a lot safer. Instead he decided that he would take his message right into the city, right into the heart of the religious and political establishment. Many of us are like the crowd on Good Friday, which gathered on Calvary, not to cheer, but also not to protest. "And went back home," says the Gospel of Luke, "beating their breasts,"⁴ proving once again that it is easier to be guilty than to be responsible. The idea in life is to be response-able – able to respond – to the love of God. That of course is what Jesus was doing by riding into the city, and that is what all of us would like to feel that we were able to do, and that is certainly something we are called upon to do – particularly when we are in deep mourning. That is, I think, one of the things that one begins to find out once this intolerable grief becomes bearable sorrow. But it should be; you should let yourself go, I am sure of that. One should grieve. As the psychiatrists say, "You have to do your grief work."

I don't know how it was with you, but when Alex died and we had two funeral services, I must say that a great moment took place, a very creative moment took place in the first one. He had died in Boston Harbor. He was driving late at night in a terrible downpour, and when the lights in the road went like this, and the Harbor was all along beside, and he just kept going straight, and went into the Boston Harbor. His buddy got out, but he never made it. He was twenty-four years old. He had gone to college in a rather interesting way. His primary interest, I think, was playing semi-pro soccer, and then playing hockey with a men's group. He had a girlfriend. He was a bartender at the Hyatt Regency, and then he went to Boston University. So all these hockey players and soccer players, bartenders, waitresses and other friends were all there at this funeral. The church was packed. Then this wonderful moment took place. I had worked out the service with my other son, David, Alex's younger brother. Their relationship had always been very tippy. At one moment in the service I see David getting up and going to stand behind the casket. That was not part of the choreography. I thought, "I wonder what he is going to do?" There was a great stillness in the church, and David looked down at the casket and said, "You blew it, buddy." It was absolutely terrific. "Just as I was getting to love you, you blew it." I looked around. Here were all these hockey players and bartenders and waitresses saying, "That's right, let him have it!" There was a wonderful, healthy anger there. You died on us, damn it! It was one of the most healthy expressions of genuine sentiment that I have seen at a funeral – and I have taken a lot of funerals and I've been to a lot of them. That is very hard to

organize, that sort of outlet for anger, but it is very legitimate. Let us never forget that all feelings are valid in this world. Not all behavior is valid, but all feelings are valid. Anger is a very legitimate response to any kind of death. And it was wonderful that his brother could let him have it that way. He did it again when we were digging the grave that summer. It had been too cold to bury him in Vermont in the winter, so he and I were digging this hole on the side of the hill. It was a very hot August day, and he looks up at the heavens and says – I won't use his exact words, because he was really cussing – he said, "Look at you, making us sweat like this down here!" I tell you this only because I do think that anger is often a very creative response to death.

Then after the second funeral in Vermont, after everyone had departed, after the shouting and the tumult had died, and the kids had gone back to school, there I was by myself. I resolved that I was going to do heavy grief work. I called Richard Sewell, a retired professor of English at Yale, a man to whom I owe an enormous amount. Not only was he a great tennis partner while I was there, but for the last ten years, while I had been preaching at Riverside, every Sunday morning at eight o'clock I would pick up the 'phone and I'd call him in New Haven and I would read him Sunday's sermon. He is smart enough to know that there are only so many changes you can make between eight and eleven o'clock, and that his main role is to say, "Oh, Bill, I just wish I could be there to hear it!" But he *has* touched things up. I think he has scolded me a little bit, too. I have had a lot of Emily Dickenson quotes in the last ten years. Everybody at Riverside Church thought I was a great expert on Emily Dickenson. So I called him, and I said, "I am going to be grieving, so give me the poems." He said, "What kind of a library do you have up there?" It is a little Vermont town of seven hundred and eighty people. I said, "It is a rather good little library." He said, "Go in the library and get out one of those anthologies. Some of them are pretty awful, but they have some pretty terrific poems in there. Look up 'sorrow' or 'grieving' or something like that, and you will certainly find some poems. And now I am going to dictate to you a couple of poems of Emily Dickenson" – which he did over the 'phone. And then he said, "Are you really serious about this?" I said, "Yes, I am very serious." He said, "You're not afraid of falling apart?" I said, "No, I need to fall apart. I'm not afraid that I'm going to fall apart and stay apart. If I don't fall apart, then I will fall apart someday." You have to deliberately organize your falling apart. Then he said, "All right, look up A. E. Houseman's "To an Athlete Dying Young."

I went and got those poems; I took them over to the church; and I played on that little church's organ. I played all the hymns: "Abide with me; fast falls the eventide," right down to the last verse, "point me to the skies."⁵ I played "Now the day is over,"⁶ "Through all the circling years,"⁷ "Be thou my guide,"⁸ and "Carry me safe over Jordan"⁹ . . . I did them all, and the tears were just streaming down my cheeks. It was tough, but it felt right. Then I turned to the poems, and he was right. Some of them were pretty bad, but even the bad ones, like bad hymns, sometimes can get through to you. I hate, for instance, (sings sarcastically:) "When morning fills the skies, my heart awakening cries . . ." Yeah, yeah, yeah. "Like at work and prayer, to Jesus I repair . . ."¹⁰ I could write better poetry than that! I remember when I was feeling full of self pity during my seminary days, I went into the chapel. That was one of the hymns we sang. It just made me angry, but the words, "Let Jesus Christ be praised! Let Jesus Christ be praised! Let Jesus Christ be praised!" It finally got through to me, and ever since then I have owed that awful hymn an enormous debt. It *is* awful poetry, but it made its point, and it really got through to me. The same thing was true of those poems in the anthology I got from our town's library. And then "To an Athlete Dying Young" was absolutely devastating.¹¹ Years later I went to see "Out of Africa," and when she recited that poem at the end I just couldn't stay in the theater. It just tore me apart. I'm not going to recite it for you, because I would break

down all over again. But it was absolutely perfect. My friend knew that it would be absolutely the thing to read in the case of Alex's death.

All that was very good. I tell it at some length just because all of us who have been in that situation realize that we do have to grieve. It is fine to grieve. You don't have to be afraid of falling apart. If you don't fall apart, you'll probably be in trouble otherwise. All feelings are valid, and most of them need to be expressed one way or another.

Then you don't ask God to rid you of the pain, you ask God to improve the quality of your suffering. That meant for me several things. First of all, you can either be so totally overcome, that, like the Israeli's and the Palestinians today, they are so into their own pain that they simply cannot feel each other's pain. It is so unfortunate in the Middle East. It works that way on both sides. The Israeli's are so full of their pain that many of them just can't begin to see how morally bankrupt their occupation policy is. The Palestinians also are so totally into their pain. That can happen, and that is what I mean by "improving the quality of your suffering." If your pain can't widen your heart to put you in touch with the pain of the world in a new way, then that is not creative. That is what Compassionate Friends, that organization, does very well. They realize that your pain can put you in touch with other people's pain. I found out that the most wonderful thing about being in such intense grief was the vulnerability that went with it. I was incredibly vulnerable. I decided that I had to keep that kind of vulnerability, because that is when life really gets to be wonderful. When you are so vulnerable, you are in touch with other people and you are conscious of things that are going on around you that you were never were conscious of before. So to allow your heart to widen, to allow your pain to put you in touch with other people's pain is one of the things I have in mind when I talk about being very creative in our grieving.

Another thing was to recognize something that I was reminded of this morning. My days here on this visit to Southern California have been so beautiful – one day here, one day in Santa Barbara, and one day in San Diego, and there hasn't been any smog at all. I just can't believe it. I know most of you don't trust air that you can't see. I've been thinking about the saying of Albert Camus'. It has been going through my mind over and over again: "There is in this world beauty, and there are the humiliated; and we must strive, hard as it is, not to be unfaithful, neither to the one nor to the other." The same thing is true in grief. We tend to be faithful to our grief, but unfaithful to all the other things. That is what is so terrific about Jesus. He wasn't weeping about himself. His pain put him in touch with other people's pain. He was weeping about the city, not about himself at all. He was weeping about the humiliated, about what was coming their way. The sorrow of it is that "They didn't even know the time of their visitation," as Luke says.¹²

The same thing is true of beauty. It was going to be spring very shortly, and in New York, spring is pretty terrific. When the robins join the pigeons, and the sticky little leaves come out, and overhead and underfoot and all around you can see, touch, feel, smell the juice and joy of spring. That is one of the advantages of not living in Southern California. You have the new experiences of spring that are so dramatic. So I resolved that there was not going to be a sticky leave in all of that city that I would pass without noticing. So, every time I walked the two or three blocks up to the church, I walked by a little path, 125th Street up to 122nd Street, along the Hudson River there, I would just look at every single sticky leaf that spring to make sure that I was not losing touch with beauty, so that my self-absorption wasn't too great.

Then one of the very unexpected creative things happened. Whittier wrote a poem about this. He wrote a very powerful poem about taking a walk in a cemetery—I can't remember the title, but it is a sonnet. He walks among the gravestones, and, as he begins to think about death, and about how we are all walking inevitably in its direction and how we are all one, because

death is the great equalizer not in the sense of making us equal, but in the sense of mocking our pretensions of being anything else. Before the ultimate death that awaits all of us, all distinctions of race, class, creed and nationality finally are shown to be what they are –always unimportant. And, he said, suddenly there is a turn at the end and “All my grievances were swept away.”¹³ There was a line in Arthur Miller’s *After the Fall*, “Good God, why are grievances the only truths that stick?”¹⁴ We all know what that means, right? “Why are grievances the only truths that stick?” Some of us have a whole garden of grievances. Even before we open our eyes in the morning, we reach for that watering pot, so that when we open our eyes everything in our garden of grievances is right there. That’s what keeps us going. It’s a lot cheaper than Cortisone when you get older. In any case, this sonnet says, “All my grievances were swept away.” I hadn’t realized until I read that poem how very true that was. I had a very deep-seated hurt, which stemmed from an earlier experience. And in the face of such an overwhelming tragedy as the death of my son, that hurt seemed so unbelievably trivial. Let it go! And I did. I had never thought that death could have that sort of creative aspect to it.

The last thing one has always to say about death, and now we are speaking of death in general, is that it is not the enemy. We can quickly see the truth of that statement when we consider the alternatives. Suppose we didn’t die. Suppose life were interminable. We would never graduate. We would never need to get up in the morning. Vestry meetings could go on for months! It is death that brings us to life. If we didn’t die, we would never need to start living! We would be as bored as the old Greek gods, and up to their same stupid tricks. If that is the truth, that death does bring us to life, then we can say, with St. Francis, “Thank God for sister death.” Without death, there would be no life, just as without leave-taking there would be no arrival, without growing old there would be no growing up, without tears there would be no laughter. So fundamentally death is good. We don’t always say that; but, when you think about it, you realize that it *is* good.

It is good also in the second sense, which I have already mentioned. It is good because it mocks our pretensions of being anything but equal. Have any of you been in any of these Moravian cemeteries that you see in the East? I don’t know whether Moravians ever got out here. The great thing about Moravian cemeteries is that there are no pyramids to the ego. They are all flat, so that when you enter one of their beautiful cemeteries the eye is not impeded by any of those obelisks or other ungainly sights that you see in so many other cemeteries. Everything is flat, and then you find out that Mr. Schmidt is not buried next to Mrs. Schmidt, who dies a few years earlier than he did. Mrs. Schmidt is buried next to the person who died just before she did. It is a wonderful understanding of community. If we could have that sense of community while we were alive, the world would be a much better place.

Finally, the last thing one always has to talk about when thinking about death is, “Is there life beyond death?” As Alfred Lord Tennyson once said, “Anything worth proving can neither be proven nor disproven.” So we don’t know with any kind of intellectual certainty. But we do know with a kind of psychological certitude, as opposed to an intellectual certainty.

I like psychological certitude. I think we spend most of our lives looking for evidence to make intelligently selfish decisions. So you turn on one of these TV evangelists, “children of a looser God,” as they are now called. They try to get you to overcome your selfishness by appealing to selfish reasons. They try to give you postponed gratification, “pie in the sky, by and by.” “Live a good life now and you will be richly rewarded later on.” I hate that kind of stuff. Trying to overcome selfishness by appealing to selfish motives is not a good way to become unselfish. It may be a way of achieving enlightened self interest, but it is certainly not a way to overcome selfishness. But psychological certitude simply makes you feel that, somehow, death is no threat to the relationship which we enjoy with life.

St. Paul has said it many times, and better than anybody else: "I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor anything else or any other creature, can separate us from the love of God."¹⁵ Neither death nor life can separate us from the love of God. "No one lives unto himself alone; no one dies unto himself alone; whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."¹⁶ That is a kind of nose-thumbing at death, a wonderful thing to say. "Death, where is thy sting? Grave, where is thy victory?"¹⁷ There is nothing so beautiful as that passage in Brahms' "German Requiem."¹⁸

That has been true of all those who have been closest to the presence of God in life. They have always felt that there has been something better coming. That is eloquent testimony. Bach wrote one of his most wonderful arias, "Ich steh' mit einem Fuss im Grabe" (I Stand with One Foot in the Grave.)¹⁹ And a black slave wrote ". . . A band of angels coming after me, coming for to carry me home."²⁰ All those closest to God in this world have felt that there is nothing that threatens that relationship, that in fact death is nothing but a horizon. And we know that a horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight. So they have been able to live in this world because they have had no fear of death. That is the way we are all called upon to live: without fear of death. We are all insecure, and we all spend an inordinate amount of our time securing ourselves against our insecurity. It is a dumb way to live! If we could live with a kind of nose-thumbing independence of death, then indeed we would be able to live much more richly, much more fully, much more vulnerably, and much more creatively. The deaths in our family would only remind us once again that it is a fate that we are all approaching, and it is all right. That should simply deepen our consciousness of how wonderful life is, and of what is really important in life, something that death never threatens.

Why don't I stop here, and let's see whether there are any comments, questions or short sermons that anybody wishes to make. Do any of the grieving parents want to add something that could be helpful? No? Anybody?

Questioner #1: How do you handle the death of an infant with Down's syndrome who is pretty badly deformed physically? The parents are feeling so bad about the situation that they just don't know what to do. This does happen.

Dr. Coffin: It certainly does. I think what is experienced is how unfair this is, right? The question is, for those of you who may not have heard over here, what about a parent who has just lost a child with Down's syndrome? Why did it happen? Why was the child born that way? Why should the child die? All these "why" questions.

I think the first thing you have to say is that if you don't know the answer, don't pretend you do. Let's not be clearer than clarity warrants. I think it is important to say, when people say, "Why did this happen?" to say, "I have no idea." Once the grieving is over, then you can say that the problem of unmerited evil is the greatest problem for a believer in a loving God. But I think the other part of that is all the unmerited good in this world. What did any of us in this room do today to merit a sky like this? To merit the lush, wonderful landscape coming up on the oldest freeway, coming up from Los Angeles? What about all the birds that are singing? Do I have to go on? What did we ever do to merit all that? The undeserved good in this world, if you want to start balancing things up, far outweighs the undeserved evil.

The undeserved good is a real problem for the nonbeliever, and the undeserved evil is obviously a problem for the believer. I think the only thing you can say is, "That's a dilemma." The worst thing you can do with a dilemma is to resolve it prematurely because you can't live with uncertainty. I think that you have to say that this is one of the things that we do not

understand. But I also think that it is important not to forget the things that we do not understand on both sides, along with the things that we do understand.

Questioner #2: When my wife died there were two things, in addition to my absolute trust in an afterlife, that sustained me. The first was Pearl Buck's use of the term, "accidents of nature," which she used to accept the deformed child of hers. Also I believe that God mourns. That is the second thing. I know that it is considered a Christian heresy to say that God weeps, but, fortunately for me, I am a heretic. I believe that God mourns things that happen in life. So we can't blame him for these accidents of nature. That helped me a lot; perhaps it will help these folks here.

Dr. Coffin: Again, if you consider the alternative, where there would be absolute, predictable order, totally, there would really be no freedom left in the world. I think in your case, your question is absolutely on target, and what you say seems to me just to bear that out. In my case it was very different. I couldn't blame God for Alex's driving the way he did, probably a little carelessly given the rain. He had just played his first game of tennis after having had rods removed from both his legs after a terrible skiing accident he'd had a year and a half before. He was so pleased that his legs had worked that he had probably had an extra frosty or two. I doubt that he had fixed the windshield wiper on that damned old Saab of his. So I can't blame God for all those things. We should be really careful about that. When a car goes too fast, to blame that on God when we are the ones who make the cars; that's outrageous. It is outrageous to say, as people always do, you hear them say it on television. I remember the last time it really got to me; we had lost 287 Marines in Lebanon. You remember? 287 Marines! Blown up like that! And there were the wives, there were the mothers, there were the girlfriends on television, saying, "Well, I guess it was the will of God." You know, it was never the will of God that there should ever be Marines in this world! I have always pictured Jesus between the battle lines, every bullet going through his body. That is "stinking thinking," to borrow a good phrase from Alcoholics Anonymous, to say that this is the will of God.

I am certainly glad you brought up the notion that God weeps, because I feel very much that way. I feel that love is self-restricting when it comes to power. Parents know what that is all about. We will not use power, hopefully, when it would intervene with the freedom that is necessary for the relationship of love. If love is the name of the game, freedom is the precondition. There is no other way about it. That means that God can't intervene to save us from ourselves. But one has to say that, when one of these terrible accidents happens or when wars happen, that God's heart is the first of all our hearts to break. God does weep, the same way that Jesus wept on Palm Sunday over the fate of the city. I have no question about it. God's eyes must be rarely dry when he looks at all the frailties and foibles of the human race. I would surely like to do all that I can do just to dry God's tears.

Questioner #3: I have been trying to help a father who lost his son, very much like yours, who had died in a car accident about a year ago. But he had been very angry at, and very alienated from, his son. He can't forgive himself for being so alienated from his son. Apparently you weren't that alienated from your son, and it seems like it was easier for you to grieve. How would you help somebody to forgive himself for that alienation?

Dr. Coffin: You don't need forgiveness for anything you can condone. That is the whole point of forgiveness. I can't forgive myself if I can approve of what I did. That is right. What do you think forgiveness is all about? It is not for something you can approve. It is like free speech. We don't need free speech when we agree, and forgiveness is for things that you cannot condone. It is very hard to forgive yourself, but if you understand that there is more forgiveness in God than there is sin in us, from a religious point of view, then emotionally we ought to be able to appropriate the knowledge that is ours through our faith. Is this person religious?

(Questioner #2: "No.") How old was the son? 18? Another thing that I have found myself often telling people is, Can you hold your son close only by grief? Would he want to be held close by grief? You can say, look at it from his point of view for a while; stop being so self-indulgent. Look at it from his point of view. How would he want to be remembered by you? Maybe he has forgiven you? I think you have to be kind of tough; you have to be willing to risk your friendship for the sake of your friend. You don't say, "Well, if I might venture to suggest" I don't think that works. It is easier, in my case, to say, "I know what you are going through. Let me give it to you straight."

Again, that argues for straightening out our relationships. If we took our own death seriously, not extrinsic death but existential death, we would immediately try to straighten out all our relationships with our friends and with our family. We would immediately stop the arms race. If we got death out of the closet, we would be able to stop the arms race. There is a whole book being written about that; I haven't come to that chapter, so I can't tell you just how it would work. But I am sure it is very true; get death out of the closet, and we will stop the arms race, because people who do not accept the meaning of death are the ones who are promoting the arms race.

Questioner #4: You asked for grieving parents to speak up. The question I have is about when my daughter died several years ago. Incidentally, her death hit me much harder than did my husband's death or my parents' deaths. Anyway, when she died we had her cremated. Then we didn't know what to do with her ashes. For a whole year I drove around in my old VW Van carrying her ashes, because I didn't know what to do. I always wondered what would happen if I had an accident. How would I explain that I had my daughter's ashes in the car?

Dr. Coffin: Didn't you find, when you finally did bury the ashes, that it was much harder to do than you thought? That is why you carried them around with you for so long. I know why you held on to them so long. It was because no one wants to bury the ashes. I had a carpenter friend, a cousin of my wife's, make a beautiful box for Alex's ashes. We had to keep them, because the ground was too hard. We were going to bury them in this little town in Vermont. So I had them in the office. My secretary knew that they were Alex's ashes; I didn't tell anybody else. ("Oh, by the way, you're sitting next to Alex's ashes!") But it was a great comfort to me. I had his picture, and I had his ashes in this beautiful box. I thought I was just waiting for the ground to thaw. No, that wasn't it at all! I wasn't quite ready to say, "This is it." I found out when I went that summer to dig the hole and put the ashes in. I thought I would be able by that time to take the service myself. Forget it. As soon as I began to think about what I would say, I would start crying again. So I got a young preacher. It was his first assignment in town. He was just out of the seminary. He handled it absolutely gorgeously. I'll just tell you one little thing about it, because this is a very important element. We dug this hole the day before in the side of the hill. This Vermonter had sold us the plot with room for ten for fifty bucks. He said, "Now, let's see. You should have a couple more inches over here. Oh," he says, "those Kendalls are always encroaching!" I said, "Come on, a couple of inches won't matter." It was kind of comforting to be with him. He was on another agenda.

We dug the hole the day before. Then with my brother and sister, and with all the cousins, we troop up the side of this hill to bury Alex's ashes. At the last minute I turned to Randy and I said, "Bring Goody along." Goody was a little dog about that size. You know, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me." The dog's name was Goody. We all went up the side, and suddenly the dog sees this hole up there. Voom! The dog takes off and jumps into the hole to see what is up there. It was really a moment of grace, because we had someone along who was not on our agenda, reminding us that the sun was going to go on shining, the clouds were going to go on drifting, the wind was going to go on blowing, and life was going to go on

even as this little grieving band was going up the side of the hill to put the ashes of our lad into the ground. That dog, being on another agenda, put the whole thing in a wonderful perspective for us that day.

All right, I feel a certain restlessness here, so why don't I just say, Happy Palm Sunday!

¹ The Rev. William Sloane Coffin served as Chaplain of Yale University during the Viet Nam War, from 1958 to 1975. He was in early opposition to the war and became famous for his anti-war activities. After serving as senior minister of New York's Riverside Church from 1977 to 1987, he became president of the SANE/FREEZE campaign for global security, the largest peace and justice organization in the United States. At the time of this presentation he was president emeritus of SANE/FREEZE, later renamed Peace Action in 1993. A more detailed biography is available at <http://ecojustice.net/coffin/Archive-Intro.htm>.

² This text transcription was made January 30, 2005, from an audiotape made in 1988 of the Reverend Doctor Coffin's presentation. All footnotes have been supplied by the transcriber. Text of hymns comes from The Cyber Hymnal Website, <http://www.cyberhymnal.org>. Text of Biblical references has been taken from Crosswalk.com Bible Study Tools, <http://bible.crosswalk.com/>.

³ **The Gospel According to Luke**, Chapter 19, verses 41 – 42 (King James Version):

⁴¹ And when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it, ⁴² Saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes.

⁴ **The Gospel According to Luke**, Chapter 23, verse 48 (King James Version):

⁴⁸ And all the multitudes who assembled to see the sight, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts.

⁵ **“Abide with Me”** Words: Henry F. Lyte, 1847; Music: “Eventide,” William H. Monk, 1861:

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide; The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide. When other helpers fail and comforts flee, Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day; Earth's joys grow dim; its glories pass away; Change and decay in all around I see; O Thou who changest not, abide with me.

Not a brief glance I beg, a passing word; But as Thou dwell'st with Thy disciples, Lord, Familiar, condescending, patient, free. Come not to sojourn, but abide with me.

Come not in terrors, as the King of kings, But kind and good, with healing in Thy wings, Tears for all woes, a heart for every plea — Come, Friend of sinners, and thus bide with me.

Thou on my head in early youth didst smile; And, though rebellious and perverse meanwhile, Thou hast not left me, oft as I left Thee, On to the close, O Lord, abide with me.

I need Thy presence every passing hour. What but Thy grace can foil the tempter's power? Who, like Thyself, my guide and stay can be? Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.

I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless; Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness. Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory? I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes; Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies. Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee; In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

⁶ **“Now the Day Is Over”** Words: Sabine Baring-Gould, in *Church Times*, 1865; Music: “Merrial,” Joseph Barnby, 1868:

Now the day is over, Night is drawing nigh, Shadows of the evening Steal across the sky.

Now the darkness gathers, Stars begin to peep, Birds, and beasts and flowers Soon will be asleep.

Jesus, give the weary Calm and sweet repose; With Thy tenderest blessing May mine eyelids close.

Grant to little children Visions bright of Thee; Guard the sailors tossing On the deep, blue sea.

Comfort those who suffer, Watching late in pain; Those who plan some evil From their sin restrain.

Through the long night watches May Thine angels spread Their white wings above me, Watching round my bed.

When the morning wakens, Then may I arise Pure, and fresh, and sinless In Thy holy eyes.

Glory to the Father, Glory to the Son, And to Thee, blest Spirit, While all ages run.

⁷ **“God of Our Life”** Words: Hugh T. Kerr, 1916; Music: “Sandon,” Charles H. Purday, *The Church and Home Tune Book*, 1857:

God of our life, through all the circling years, We trust in Thee; In all the past, through all our hopes and fears,
Thy hand we see. With each new day, when morning lifts the veil, We own Thy mercies, Lord, which never fail.

God of the past, our times are in Thy hand; With us abide. Lead us by faith to hope’s true promised land; Be
Thou our Guide. With Thee to bless, the darkness shines as light, And faith’s fair vision changes into sight.
God of the coming years, through paths unknown We follow Thee; When we are strong, Lord, leave us not
alone; Our Refuge be. Be Thou for us in life our daily Bread, Our heart’s true Home when all our years have
sped.

⁸ **“My Faith Looks Up to Thee”** Words: Ray Palmer, 1830; Music: “Olivet (Mason),” Lowell Mason, 1830:

My faith looks up to Thee, Thou Lamb of Calvary, Savior divine! Now hear me while I pray, take all my guilt
away, O let me from this day be wholly Thine!

May Thy rich grace impart Strength to my fainting heart, my zeal inspire! As Thou hast died for me, O may my
love to Thee, Pure warm, and changeless be, a living fire!

While life’s dark maze I tread, And griefs around me spread, be Thou my Guide; Bid darkness turn to day, wipe
sorrow’s tears away, Nor let me ever stray from Thee aside.

When ends life’s transient dream, When death’s cold sullen stream over me roll; Blest Savior, then in love, fear
and distrust remove; O bear me safe above, a ransomed soul!

⁹ This phrase could not be matched to a hymn on the Internet.

¹⁰ **“When Morning Gilds the Skies”** Words: From the *Katholisches Gesangbuch* (Würzburg, Germany: circa 1744) (*Beim frühen Morgenlicht*); translated from German to English by Edward Caswall in Formby’s *Catholic Hymns* (London: 1854), & Robert S. Bridges in the *Yattendon Hymnal* (Oxford, England: 1899); Music: “Laudes Domini,” Joseph Barnby, in *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (London: 1868):

When morning gilds the skies my heart awaking cries: May Jesus Christ be praised! Alike at work and prayer,
to Jesus I repair: May Jesus Christ be praised!

When you begin the day, O never fail to say, May Jesus Christ be praised! And at your work rejoice, to sing
with heart and voice, May Jesus Christ be praised!

Whene’er the sweet church bell peals over hill and dell, May Jesus Christ be praised! O hark to what it sings, as
joyously it rings, May Jesus Christ be praised!

My tongue shall never tire of chanting with the choir, May Jesus Christ be praised! This song of sacred joy, it
never seems to cloy, May Jesus Christ be praised!

Does sadness fill my mind? A solace here I find, May Jesus Christ be praised! Or fades my earthly bliss? My
comfort still is this, May Jesus Christ be praised!

To God, the Word, on high, the host of angels cry, May Jesus Christ be praised! Let mortals, too, upraise their
voice in hymns of praise, May Jesus Christ be praised!

Be this at meals your grace, in every time and place; May Jesus Christ be praised! Be this, when day is past, of
all your thoughts the last May Jesus Christ be praised!

When mirth for music longs, this is my song of songs: May Jesus Christ be praised! When evening shadows
fall, this rings my curfew call, May Jesus Christ be praised!

When sleep her balm denies, my silent spirit sighs, May Jesus Christ be praised! When evil thoughts molest,
with this I shield my breast, May Jesus Christ be praised!

The night becomes as day when from the heart we say: May Jesus Christ be praised! The powers of darkness
fear when this sweet chant they hear: May Jesus Christ be praised!

No lovelier antiphon in all high Heav’n is known Than, Jesus Christ be praised! There to the eternal Word the
eternal psalm is heard: May Jesus Christ be praised!

Let all the earth around ring joyous with the sound: May Jesus Christ be praised! In Heaven’s eternal bliss the
loveliest strain is this: May Jesus Christ be praised!

Sing, suns and stars of space, sing, ye that see His face, Sing, Jesus Christ be praised! God’s whole creation
o’er, for aye and evermore Shall Jesus Christ be praised!

In Heav’n’s eternal bliss the loveliest strain is this, May Jesus Christ be praised! Let earth, and sea and sky from
depth to height reply, May Jesus Christ be praised!

Be this, while life is mine, my canticle divine: May Jesus Christ be praised! Sing this eternal song through all
the ages long: May Jesus Christ be praised!

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- ¹¹ **“To An Athlete Dying Young”** by A. E. Housman:
The time you won your town the race We chaired you through the market-place; Man and boy stood cheering by, And home we brought you shoulder-high.
To-day, the road all runners come, Shoulder-high we bring you home, And set you at your threshold down,
Townsmen of a stiller town.
Smart lad, to slip betimes away From fields where glory does not stay, And early though the laurel grows It withers quicker than the rose.
Eyes the shady night has shut Cannot see the record cut, And silence sounds no worse than cheers After earth has stopped the ears:
Now you will not swell the rout Of lads that wore their honours out, Runners whom renown outran And the name died before the man.
So set, before its echoes fade, The fleet foot on the sill of shade, And hold to the low lintel up The still-defended challenge-cup.
And round that early-laurelled head Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead, And find unwithered on its curls The garland briefer than a girl’s.
- ¹² **The Gospel According to Luke** Chapter 19, verses 43 – 44 (King James Version):
⁴³ For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side, ⁴⁴ And shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation.
- ¹³ **“Forgiveness”** by **John Greenleaf Whittier**:
My heart was heavy, for its trust had been
Abused, its kindness answered with foul wrong;
So, turning gloomily from my fellow-men,
One summer Sabbath day I strolled among
The green mounds of the village burial place;
Where, pondering how all human love and hate
Find one sad level: and how, soon or late,
Wronged and wrongdoer, each with meekened face,
And cold hands folded over a still heart,
Pass the green threshold of our common grave,
Whither all footsteps tend, whence none depart,
Awed for myself, and pitying my race,
Our common sorrow, like a mighty wave,
Swept all my pride away, and trembling I forgave!
- ¹⁴ **Arthur Miller, *After the Fall*** (New York: Viking Adult, February 11, 1964) Act II, p. 76: “God, why is betrayal the only truth that sticks?”
- ¹⁵ **St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans**, Chapter 8, verses 38 – 39 (King James Version):
³⁸ For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.
- ¹⁶ **St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans**, Chapter 14, 7 – 8 (King James Version):
⁷ For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. ⁸ For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s.
- ¹⁷ **St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians**, Chapter 15, verse 55 (King James Version):
⁵⁵ O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?
- ¹⁸ **Johannes Brahms, *Ein Deutsches Requiem***, Opus 45, Section 6, “Siehe, ich sage euch ein Geheimnis,” (“Behold, I show you a mystery”).
- ¹⁹ **Johan Sebastian Bach, “Ich steh’ mit einem Fuss im Grabe”** BWV 156, number 2a aria

²⁰ **“Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,”** Anonymous African American Spiritual:

Refrain: Swing low, sweet chariot, Coming for to carry me home, Swing low, sweet chariot, Coming for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan, and what did I see? Coming for to carry me home, A band of angels coming after me,
Coming for to carry me home.

Refrain

If you get there before I do, Coming for to carry me home, Tell all my friends I’m coming, too. Coming for to
carry me home.

Refrain

I’m sometimes up and sometimes down, Coming for to carry me home, But still my soul feels heavenly bound,
Coming for to carry me home.

Refrain

The brightest day that I can say, Coming for to carry me home, When Jesus washed my sins away, Coming for
to carry me home.

Refrain