

## *Patricia Stich Summers*

### *Sermon*

In the Hebrew Bible book of Ecclesiastes we read, **“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die.”** These words may be from the Bible, but on a day like this, we want to REJECT those words. For we cannot affirm there is ever a time, ever a good time, for a woman in the prime of her life and discovering anew her spiritual side, to die. But while we cannot affirm this was a good time for Patricia to die, all the same, we are forced to recognize the truth of Ecclesiastes’ words, as painful as they are to hear. **“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die.”**

So we are here with all sorts of mixed up, messed up and unresolved feelings. We wish we had done something differently so that we wouldn’t be here today. *You* may be wishing you had done something differently. For those who knew Patricia best, for the family who loved their Patty, this is a tough time: we can give thanks that Patricia at last has found freedom from demons and a disease she could not defeat and entered an everlasting peace. But it is also so hard to let go. And whenever a person close to us dies, especially if that person is similar to us in age or circumstance, that loss puts us in painful proximity to our own mortality. This is a tough day.

So, what does God’s word in the scriptures have to us now and today so that we can face tomorrow?

On one point, all of the Bible is in complete agreement: God keeps his promises and God’s promises to us are not qualified. God promises to be with us always. When we go through the stormiest and most dangerous waters of life, the prophet Isaiah declares, God will be with you. When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned, because God is with you. As the Psalmist writes, when you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, God is with you. And as the apostle Paul writes, nothing, nothing in life or in death, no manner of demonic powers or destructive forces, no disease – nothing in all of creation, can separate us from the love of God given in Christ Jesus the Lord. Those are God’s promises, and God keeps those promises!

The first message throughout the Bible is God keeps his promises. And the second is we human beings break our promises. We fall down and fail. And we are responsible for those falls and those failings. There is no denying that. And there is no denying that God says, “Here I am, let me pick you so you can try again. For I am with you now and I will be with you always. No matter what.”

A specific promise we have in the New Testament is that in Jesus Christ we have a shepherd, a good shepherd, who is prepared to lay down his life for us, his sheep. This is a promise Christ kept. He died that we might live. And in that same passage in John, there is another, lesser known promise: Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. I lay down my life for my sheep. *AND I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice*”.

Now there are several ways to interpret this verse. One way I read this verse is this: NO ONE is excluded from the promises of God. Including those who don't fit the so-called mold, and those who might not even know what to call God, much less when and where to find God. For God has a yearning to bring all of the sheep, all of his children, into the safety of the sheep-fold, the warm embrace of the family of God. God yearns for all of us to live in harmony and community with one another and in communion with him. Because of that yearning, no one who seeks God is ever turned away! And because of that yearning, because of God's promises to us, we can find the vision and strength we need in life, even on a day like this.

Those are the promises of God. Now, what do we do and where do we go from here?

First, I would invite you to pray. Pray for Patricia's family and friends. Pray for yourself. Pray and give thanks God is there, waiting for you. Pray.

Second, let us comfort one another in our loss. Ecclesiastes, in that same chapter when he writes, "there is a time to be born and a time to die", also writes, "There is a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing." Well friends, this is the time for embracing. A time to comfort one another. We cannot remove the loss and grief our friends and family are carrying. But we can share in that burden. We can carry one another. Comfort one another.

And third, I invite you to examine yourself. Not in a sense of judging Patricia or anyone else, but in the sense of taking an inventory of where you are in life and in your spiritual journey. And where you want to be and where you need to be. Take time to take stock.

Friends: we have the confidence to pray, we have the power to extend comfort, and we have courage to look inward, because God offers himself to us and for us. And God assures us, when you walk through those stormy waters, I will be with you. When you hit the bottom in life, I am with you. Even when you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, God will be with you. This is God's promise. This is God's word for you. AMEN.

R. Charles Grant  
Pastor  
Bon Air Presbyterian Church  
Richmond, Virginia  
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