

Sermon on John 10:22-30, Psalm 23
Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 12, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

On Friday I buried my father-in-law, Lieng Chao Tann, my wife's father and my children's grandfather. Most of you are aware that he had suffered a heart attack on Maundy Thursday, had two strokes in the weeks following, and died at home surrounded by his family last Sunday morning at 8:45 am. Over the past two weeks his extended family came to be at his side in the hospital and at home, six daughters and five sons-in-law, 19 grandchildren and 2 great-grandchildren, nieces and nephews and their children, who all called him "Gong". Three weeks of love coming home. Last Thursday night we gathered to share stories of his life, and on Friday morning we remembered him with thanksgiving for his life, at Christ Lutheran Church on Capitol Hill, where he was baptized as an adult, a refugee from Cambodia in 1980, and worshiped almost every Sunday for almost 40 years. Gong's father was born in China, fled to Cambodia during World War 2, and so Gong had grown up in Cambodia, where he had eight children (two daughters), and served as a principal in the Chinese School of his hometown, Sisophon. His whole family suffered from the Khmer Rouge during the mid-1970s, their mother died, and they fled to Thailand as refugees, coming to America in August of 1980. I met my father-in-law in 1983, became friends with his family and later an intern pastor at the church, where I became immersed in Cambodian culture and helped immigrants learn English, deal with landlords, and taught their children the Christian faith which called us to welcome them. In a few years I asked for his permission to marry his daughter Kim Huor over tea in the church apartment in 1985, and we were married there in 1986. We have experienced a lot together, and now most of Gong's grandchildren are young adults in their 20s or older, starting their own families. We thought Gong would live forever, because he was always there for all of us. But all of a sudden his heart failed him three weeks ago, and ever since it has been a family vigil at the hospital and in his daughter's home.

Several of you have gone through such an experience, holding vigil and caring for someone you love, most likely a mother or father, at home or in hospice. It is a bittersweet experience, full of ups and downs, a combination of sadness, moments of laughter, sharing memories and beauty. I went through this with my own father, also. For almost two weeks at the hospital, my father-in-law was surrounded by grandchildren and daughters who cared for him 24 hours a day. Most of my time was spent transporting relatives to and from the hospital, picking them up at the airport and running errands, stopping in at church from time to time to keep up on things, and make daily visits to the hospital myself. Everyone was

exhausted – those of you who share this experience know all about that. After two weeks, and two strokes, the family knew he had had enough, and so he came home, for home hospice care.

Then last Sunday morning at 8 am, Kim got the call from her sister to come over. I was getting ready for church, with my guitar already in the trunk, my sermon all prepared, on the front seat. I had picked up the cake for Bob Hausman's farewell the day before. So I stopped at my father-in-law's house on the way, where we found him struggling for breath. I called the triage nurse, who told us to give him hydro-morphine in his mouth. But before I left, with his daughters gathered around his bed, I shared scripture and a prayer with Gong. It's hard to know what to say when you are so tired and numb, but we have this gift: in the words of hope and comfort in the scripture that God has given to us, in prayers that we have memorized. I took out my pastoral care book, said an invocation and just followed the rubrics for prayers at the end of life. I started with the 23rd Psalm, just as we read it today; *"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.... Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.... Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."* You see, I didn't know what to say, but I knew that psalm! People of faith have long read this psalm in their times of peril, in suffering, and at the death of loved ones – it was created for times exactly like this! Then we all said the Lord's Prayer: *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.... Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.* I closed with a benediction: *The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord look upon you with favor, and give you peace. Amen.* And that was it, it was enough. Then I headed off to church, only to receive a call on the way that Gong had died. He had stopped breathing within five minutes of that prayer.

So I returned home to see everyone in tears, and made those calls to hospice to inform them of his passing. Then I called my colleagues at church: Isaac to tell the choir and those preparing for worship, to Pastor Trudy who graciously was ready to preside and preach a sermon she just started preparing an hour before, to Tammy to let everyone else know who needed to know. I knew that you were in good hands. You have all been trained for such moments as these: to worship, sing, and pray using the words you have heard and the hymns you have sung all your lives. It has all been a preparation for times such as these, when our loved ones die, when we need to care for others at the moment of death, and when we are about to die ourselves. We have certain psalms, helpful hymns and prayers, which we have been saying, singing and praying from the time we were babies. This is how we can get through these moments of crisis and these times of suffering or death –

because we have words that God has given us, to keep us focused, to give you and me and those around us comfort – even when we are distressed, unable to focus ourselves or think of a single word of our own to say! That’s why we call it *God’s Word*! So, in all of God’s wisdom, we have such words of scripture today to give us guidance, in a world and a life that can be so very fragile. One day we are walking and talking as usual, the next day a heart can stop beating, or tragedy can strike. What you and I do today in Sunday worship is not an empty, meaningless exercise! What we hear, see, say and do today can guide us in our daily lives, and give us those words we need when we can’t think of anything to say!

We heard in our first lesson from Acts the story of a faithful disciple, a woman named Tabitha (also known as Dorcas), who became ill and died. Her friends washed her body and took her to her bed, when the others called Peter to come. When Peter arrived, he found the other women praying and crying beside Tabitha’s body – just as I found Kim’s father’s body when I returned home after he had died. Now, Peter prayed, and God gave him the power to raise her to life again. He said, “Tabitha, get up.” And she got up! I didn’t ask for that power, and God didn’t raise my father in law. But I recognize the scene in that bedroom, and I know the power of prayer. It gave Kim’s father the comforting power to die in peace, to let himself go, to end his suffering. To have such a peaceful ending has been a comfort to everyone in his family: that he simply stopped breathing without pain, surrounded by his beloved family, for his final journey.

And so this past Friday we celebrated his death and remembered his life with gratitude, just as so many Christians have died and been remembered by their families for centuries. In such times we remember the faithful and say those words of scripture, like those Jesus said today in the gospel of John, how “*my sheep hear my voice and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish (even when they die). No one will snatch them out of my hand.*” Just like Gong. Just like so many faithful followers of Jesus who have died over the years, with hope in the promise of life forever.

And so John, in the Book of Revelation, describes the vision God gave him, in which he saw “*a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, ...saying salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb...singing God’s praises...They will hunger no more, and thirst no more....for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*” (Rev. 7:9-17)

Brothers and sisters, you know that in the end, we have no power to stop death when it comes, or to prevent every human tragedy from happening in this world. Sometimes all we have are words, the promises God has given us in Christ Jesus, who has come to show us all the way to life. Not by what WE do, but by

believing what God has done in him! The words of scripture which remind you and me that God is always there, no matter what, that the Lord is your shepherd who always leads you in right pathways, who walks with you even through the valley of the shadow of death, so you have nothing to fear, because you have God's promise of goodness and mercy all the days of your life. And in the end, you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Absolutely; you can count on it.

So I leave you with two images from the end of Kim's father's life and his rising, that have given me peace and comfort as I reflect on his life – so full of suffering, but also so full of love, with family, faith, and God's peace. After Gong died, we kept his body at home for 24 more hours, for family to say goodbye. The next morning at 9 am the funeral directors came for Gong's body: two gentle young women who gave his family all the time they needed with him. They were like angels! It was a beautiful thing to witness – it was as if they had come for their own father. I said a benediction, and then they came with a white linen cloth. His daughters wrapped him lovingly with the cloth, gently picked him up, and they all carried him slowly out of the house, down the front steps, to the ambulance that took him, speaking to him every step of the way, saying goodbye. I could just imagine how the women wrapped Jesus' broken and bruised body so carefully after taking him down from the cross, wrapping him in linen cloth like the cloth covering Gong's body. Jesus' mother, and the other women disciples, gently caring for him as mothers do for their children and loved ones in life and in death.

The other image comes from after the funeral, and his burial at Roselawn Cemetery, in which the whole family participated, tossing flowers and shovelfuls of dirt onto his grave. The next day, yesterday, I went alone to the cemetery to see his grave, covered in beautiful flowers. The sun was peeking from behind the clouds, and a gentle wind was blowing. Then I looked up into the sky, and saw just above the tree shadowing his grave, two eagles hovering above, floating in the sky, looking down at me. They circled above, and then slowly glided to the east, looking for food. There wasn't a sound, just the sight of those two great birds circling overhead, then slowly flying away. It gave me such a sense of peace. It was as if Gong was flying with those he loved, his spirit free at last from the body that had become unable to move. It was like a vision of a resurrection, of his soul flying off to heaven, to be a peace with God, and all the other witnesses and ancestors who have gone before us.

Now that's my Easter story. What's yours? I can only tell you what I saw and witnessed with my own eyes and ears. The moral of the story is: listen to God's words of hope – they are meant for you, to give you direction when you are lost, to give you comfort when you need comfort in your pain, to give you hope when all seems hopeless, to give you life even as you and your loved ones die.

And may the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, and give you peace, now and always. Amen.