



Abide with Me Deuteronomy 34:1-12 Romans 14:7-9

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Several years ago, during my first trip to Scotland in 2005, I took a few weeks before I was due to show up in Scotland and did a little traveling around Europe on my own. This was my first time traveling internationally alone, so I really didn't know how to do it yet. I landed in Paris but was a bit overwhelmed so I decided to skip down to the south of France and wound up in Nice. My first night there I almost got plowed over by a moped, and during my second night I learned the valuable lesson that if you ever feel a little unsafe, go find the fanciest hotel you can and just hang out in the lobby. It always works for me.

But even successfully surviving my first two nights, as I neared my third night in Nice, I began to feel an intense loneliness. It was a Friday night, and while others were out on the town, enjoying the French Riviera in the summertime, I was in my hotel room just feeling a little lost, pretty isolated, and a bit depressed. So in this era before smart phones, I picked up my Lonely Planet guidebook and read over the various things to see and do for the umpteenth time. Maybe if I could find something fun to do the next day, my last day in Nice, maybe I could turn my melancholy around and continue on my adventure on a high note.

And this time, as I read through the book, I noticed an "attraction" I had not seen before: "The Holy Trinity Anglican Church – see the adjoining cemetery which contains the grave of tuberculosis-sufferer Henry Francis Lyte, the British vicar from Devonshire who wrote the hymn *Abide with Me*."

Now, when one is trying to avoid melancholy, visiting the grave of a tuberculosis-laden pastor from the 18th century is not exactly recommended. But I was filled with a sense of awe. You see, my paternal grandmother's maiden name was Lyte. It's my understanding that she wasn't too happy when she got married and went from being Lucille Lyte to Lucy Smith. So she took a great joy in noting that we were descendants of this pastor and poet Henry Francis Lyte, who authored this famous hymn and several others. It had become a bit of a joke in my family – while others might claim the

lineage of Thomas Jefferson or Mark Twain, our family's great patriarch was this pastor and poet who suffered all his life from illness, and was made to travel from England to Italy for the dry climate, only to take ill in France and die before making it to his destination.

And his most famous hymn was written only a few weeks before his own death and burial in this very cemetery.

*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.*

I cannot tell you the immense shock and joy I felt in finding out this fact, that I had happened upon the grave of my ancestor, himself a pastor, just at a time when I was doing much discernment about my own life as a minister. The next day I made it down to the church and found his grave in a beautiful garden alongside a small display about his life and his writings. For a young woman, trying to find God's will in her life in the midst of sadness, his words and my little discovery meant so much I can hardly explain it. In his words I had found comfort, in his death I had found life, in his burial I had found meaning, strange though it was in the midst of my youthful loneliness.

*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.*

Lyte wrote these words about death and life, youth and old-age, just before his last sermon at his church in Devonshire. It is recorded that he had to crawl his way to the pulpit, and that his message came as through from a dying man. In our culture, we have seen this eerily beautiful performance before, in the form of Randy Pausch, who delivered his memorable "last lecture" before his death from cancer, or Razi Dilawari, an oncologist who died a few years ago from the same cancer he had treated in his profession. These people, with one foot in life and one foot in death, can seem to speak with a special kind of wisdom. And just like how this two hundred year old grave give me comfort in my loneliness, it can be a great comfort to hear from someone so close to death that they too are comfortable, wise and ready to meet their Maker.

*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.*

Moses, the scripture says, was another one of these people who seems to speak to us from the grave. He shows us not just a great death of a great leader, but he gives us very practical advice about how we should approach and prepare for our own death. Moses does a number of things to prepare for his death: he appoints Joshua as the next leader, he declares how the Israelites should remember the Lord, he writes a song and teaches it to all them, he instructs the people, he goes to a place of beauty, he blesses his friends and his family, he offers his last words of wisdom, and then dies. After his death, he is buried and mourned by the community, and their new leader, Joshua.

These things that Moses did are all things that we can do even now to create the environment for a good death. A “good death” might sound like a strange idea, but it can be possible, especially if we are blessed to know that death is likely imminent. Like Moses, we can begin to prepare ourselves for death through open communication. We can appoint a leader, a trusted health care proxy who can make difficult decisions if we cannot. We can write our wishes through an advance directive or will, and we can present them to the people by making sure that family members have access to the necessary documents and by fostering an open, supportive conversation about death. These actions, difficult though they may be, can help us prepare ourselves and our families for the end of life issues we all will face.

*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.*

Yet simply preparing for death as best we can, just as Moses did, may not be enough to create that sense of comfort and trust that Henry Francis Lyte had. We may not understand how he was able to put into words the experience of death in this world and life in Christ. But as Paul says in Romans, If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. Whatever our life is, and whatever our death will be, we belong to God. Everything we do, all that we are, all that has happened, all we have lost – all of all that is, and was, and will be – is fulfilled in the love of Jesus Christ, who is not dead, but is alive.

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.*

Now maybe I just have death on the brain. On All Saints Day, we are called to remember those who have gone before us in the faith. Maybe it's the constant toll of horrors and death in the Middle East, in Ukraine, in our own backyard. Maybe it's because I remember just about every day the experience of sitting at my husband's bedside as he took his last breath. Maybe it's that I recently passed a strange milestone in which I realized I have now been a widow for longer than I was a wife.

But I don't think that it's just my preoccupation or this time of year that makes this topic timely. Each of us has, or unfortunately will, lose someone very dear to us, a mother or father, husband or wife, partner, friend, sister, brother, child. We are each at different places along our journey, but all of us have seen the face of death in some form. In these times, our need for the fellowship of friends and the love of Christ is great. We cannot be afraid to ask these difficult questions, we cannot be asked to hold it all together, to grieve in some prescribed form, to assume that just because it happened years ago, or even to someone we barely knew, that we should be "over it."

And yet, we are people of hope, people with the experience of the awe of God. As we remember all the saints who have come before us, we can look to Moses to show us how to prepare for death, and yet hold to Jesus Christ who has demonstrated for us that death is just one more step towards life eternal with Him.

*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.*

Amen.