As I entered the hospital room, nothing looked unusual. The woman I was visiting was the elderly mother of one of my members. She had been in the hospital for several days, and had slipped into a coma that morning. She was dying.

Two women were in the room with her. One was the hospital’s nursing specialist. The other was an elder in my church. The patient’s daughter had died unexpectedly a few days previous and we had had a very emotional service at the church the day before. The elder and the nurse were good friends of the woman who had died, and were still hurting from their loss. The three of us were there for the elderly woman, and to give one last gift to a dear friend: to accompany her mother in her death.

We held her hands. Her breathing slowed, then stopped. The nurse listened to her heart and told us she was gone. We stood there in silence, then joined hands in prayer before tearful embraces. It was the first time I had shared in the death of another. Shared, not witnessed, for one is never a passive observer to another’s death.

It’s been more than thirty years now since the publication of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’ classic *On death and dying*. Kubler-Ross opened the door to the dying, and to talking with the dying about dying, and talking with the living about dying. Of course writing about death and dying is not new. Plato had described Socrates death in 399 BC in painful detail in *The Apology*, and the gospel accounts report the agony and gruesome death of Jesus. Death was a major theme for the 19th century Russian novelists Tolstoi and Dostoevsky. In the 20th century the French existentialists Camus and Sartre plumbed the depths and despair of death and dying. But the breakthrough of Kubler-Ross was her insight that death was neither an evil nor did it have to be an angst-filled tragedy, but could be a time for growing. *On death and dying* gave doctors, nurses, ministers, and those dying now and those who will (tomorrow) die permission to talk about dying. The recent novel *Tuesdays with Morrie* and last month’s PBS series *On our own terms* with Bill Moyers are two of the more provocative installments in the movement launched by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross.

In the company of such giants, the goal of today’s sermon is quite modest: to offer some reflections from the Christian tradition on living and dying. So, where to begin?

We begin with the simple affirmation **dying is part of living.** Death is not an exception, but the norm. Biblical faith recognizes that living and dying is what all of God’s creatures do. Dying is part of living. That we WILL die is not open to question. What is open to question is how we die.

Dying is part of living, but that doesn’t mean we don’t **fear death.** Woody Allen said, “I don’t fear death. I just don’t want to be there when it happens.” Dying is the most universal of human customs. And wanting to not talk about dying, wanting to not even think about dying, is almost as universal as well. We are sad when a loved one dies. We are afraid when we think about our dying.

Dying leads us into unknown territory. Fearing death is a natural, normal human response. It is even healthy to be afraid of dying – our fear leads us away from dangerous situations.
It is normal to fear death – no matter what your age. But *I want you children and youth in particular, to hear this: there is nothing wrong with you if you become anxious and afraid when you think about death and dying.* And when you feel that way, your parents and teachers and older friends and I are ready to talk with you about your fears. Not because we know everything about death and dying. But because together we can learn from and help each other.

And this goes for everybody, no matter what your age: as dying is part of living, so also the fear of dying is natural and to be expected. *And it is appropriate and healthy to talk about our fears.*

Although dying is part of living, *dying remains life’s greatest mystery.* We learn from experience, but we experience our own dying but once. It is in our dying that our living takes on meaning. I think it was Samuel Johnson who said something like, “Nothing focuses the mind like knowing your own death is imminent.” It has also been said there are no atheists on the battlefield. I have known few atheists in the hospital room. Church historian Martin Marty, who lost his wife of many years to cancer, has written, “Death, the definer, gives meaning to life and history. It is an instrument that helps provide meaning for daily existence.” (LP7:3:30)

It is in dying that we glimpse the humanity of God, who enters human life and human suffering, living and suffering with us. And it is in dying that we grasp the divine destiny of humankind created in the likeness and image of God. So it should come as no surprise that the segment of Jesus’ life which receives the greatest attention in the gospels is the story of his dying. For despite our desperate fears about dying, we have a fascination with death and dying. We yearn to understand it. And as with Jesus’ life, when we grasp the DYING part, the LIVING part becomes a whole lot clearer and easier. As writer Madeleine L’Engle has written, “I rebel against death, yet I know that it is how I RESPOND to death’s inevitability that is going to make me less or more fully alive.” (*The summer of the Great-Grandmother, LP Ibid*)

The liturgy, hymns and scripture lessons for today’s service are among those often chosen for the funeral service, the main time in the church’s worship when we talk and sing about death. This choice was deliberate, for I wanted to bring into our normal, everyday conversation the concerns we have about dying.

In those familiar words from Ecclesiastes we read that *“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die…”* Dying is part of living. Dying comes to us with every breath we take. The 4th century church father Gregory of Nyssa said*“It is not an exaggeration to say that death is woven into our life…”* (Ibid) How we die and how we live cannot be separated: our living and our dying are each part of this precious life bestowed upon us by God. As the seasons of our lives come and go, so also the seasons of creation come and go. All of creation is in flux. What remains, all that remains the same, is the love and grace of God. As Ecclesiastes concludes after surveying all of the changes, turmoils, and triumphs of life, *whatever humankind does comes and goes, but the word of God endures forever.*

In that most loved of all Psalms, the psalmist addresses both our fears and our hopes. In the 23rd Psalm we hear testimony that while God does not shield us FROM death, God is with us every step of the way in our living and our dying: *though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me…* These are strong words about life and about God: death and dying comes to us all, but those who live within the fellowship of God are privileged to *not face death alone.* These are words of comfort: God will be with us throughout all of life. These are also words calling us to action: we who are the sheep of God’s pasture are also called to shepherd one another through the mountain passes and harsh winds of the mountainous journey of life. Through the fellowship of the church we have companions to walk with us in our living and our dying. Through the community of the church we support and guide one another.
Chapter 8 of Paul’s letter to the Romans is the summation of the Christian’s hope for living and dying:
“I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Not even the shadow of death can fall between God and us. When we are afraid, God is with us. When we have our doubts, God is with us. When we give up in despair, God is with us. When we are dying, God is with us. Even when we are dead, God is with us. For nothing, nothing at all, can come between us and the love of God we know in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Most of my conversations with the dying are too personal and too holy to share. One I can share with you was with a colleague and dear friend of mine, the Rev. Margaret Dirks. Some of you may remember me telling you about my friend Margaret. She lived most of her life with chronic heart disease. She had a rich life, but all the same, death came to her in a season of life earlier than most. In the end, she was tired, but being a woman of profound faith, she faced dying as she did living: straight on and without flinching.

When she was hospitalized for the last time, she called for me. I came by that evening, and we talked about various things—mostly concerns of the church. Then she said simply, “I want you to do my funeral. Preach on Isaiah 43”. That was that. That’s all she had to say about her dying. The rest was about the living.

When I got home that evening I read my Bible with more intensity than usual. I knew the text of course, but I didn’t know it as my next funeral sermon. In Isaiah 43 the prophet speaks to people long in exile, people long beaten down and broken, through a vision in which God assures his people, “when you pass through the waters, I will be with you.” As I was with you when you walked through the dry land of the Red Sea, as I delivered you from your oppressors in Egypt, I will be with you. As you walk through life’s darkest days, I will be with you. As you come to life’s final hour, I will be with you.

This is the testimony of our faith. This is the hope we have in God through Jesus Christ. This is the power and strength for the living of these days. That in life and in death, in our living and in our dying, the God we know in Jesus Christ is with us every step of the way. This is the word of the Lord who created you, the one who formed you: do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your savior. (Isa 43:1-2) Thus says the Lord. AMEN.