

Hope in the face of death (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13)

Everybody dies. My mother-in-law intended to be ready.

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She had been fine when we had seen her last, only a week before. Sure, life at age 89 moved at a slower pace, but my mother-in-law still managed to work the daily crossword in ink, share lunch with friends, and enjoy visits from the children who addressed their crayoned artwork "To Grandma-the-Great."

The text messages we received that morning were entirely unexpected. *Mama's at the hospital...Doctor says she's dying...Get here as soon as you can.*

Although we were caught off guard by the events that unfolded over the next 16 hours, my mother-in-law was not. For as long as I'd known her, she had taken seriously Jesus' command in this week's Gospel reading: "Keep awake, for you do not know the day or the hour." Always a planner, she had been preparing for most of her life. Everybody dies, after all, and she intended to be ready.

Some of those preparations had taken the form of practical arrangements, the kind that can be checked off a list. Update the will. Pre-pay the burial plot. Write an obituary and select a photo to go with it. Select scripture and hymns for the funeral. She had completed all of those items and more, keeping track of the paperwork in a manila folder in her desk.

Other forms of preparation were less quantifiable, although years earlier she had actually written some of them down as a personal mission statement. Put Christ at

the center. Practice hospitality. Seek to live into God's call. Take an interest in others, especially children.

She was at the hospital that day on account of a fall at home. When tests indicated a massive, systemic infection, including the beginning of organ failure, she did not hesitate in her instructions to the doctors. There would be no heroic measures.

They pressed her to be sure she understood the implications of her choice.

Yes, she said. I'm dying. It's okay.

She expressed no self-pity. Only contentment and certainty that God would be present through whatever came next.

The remaining hours of her life proved to be an embodiment of those things that mattered most to her—God and family—and a fitting expression of her identity and her faith. As her children and their families gathered at her bedside, for as long as she still had the strength, her words expressed unwavering love for them. She was sorry to leave, she said, but she was eager to be reunited with her husband and to be, finally, in the nearer presence of Jesus.

During that last day, my mother-in-law bequeathed to her family a living hope that would nourish them through the hard and sad months of grief ahead. It is a resolute hope that finds its strength in the promises of God.

"Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again," Paul writes to the Thessalonians, "even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died... and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words."