

Sermon

*A Service of Witness to the Resurrection: Edward W. Hopkins
Northminster Presbyterian Church: 30 October 2012, 11:00am*

Reading of the texts: Psalm 23; John 14¹⁻⁷; Hebrews 12¹⁻³; Revelation 7⁹⁻¹⁴

If you want to know what it means to be human—if you want to taste the broad spectrum of human experience—the second best place to turn is the library of Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets. Everything is in there: War, madness, political intrigue, and cruelty. There’s love, playfulness, bravery, and loyalty. Shakespeare’s scope led one literary scholar to say that he gave expression to every human passion: “Shakespeare discovered. . .hell,” the critic wrote. “He discovered heaven as well. But he remained on earth.”

Of course, pride of place when it comes to human experience belongs to the Bible. There’s plenty of politics, murder, love, betrayal, loyalty, and humor in the Holy Canon, and to read it is to read the human experience itself, from the despondency of Psalm 88 to the comfort of Psalm 23. We think of the Bible as being about God, and it so obviously is, but it’s about us, too, and the Bible looks at us with unblinkered gaze. We are cast in the chapters and verses of Scripture as beings who are born into horrid depravity and capable of angelic virtue. In these pages we see hell. And we see heaven.

Ed Hopkins saw hell—and he saw heaven. He saw the worst humans could do to each other as a soldier in Patton’s army. From the Battle of the Bulge, where Ed said he went six weeks without being able to take a shower, and that was the least of their worries, to concentration camp Dachau, Ed had a front row seat to the horrors we can inflict on ourselves. It was tragedy that would stress even Shakespeare’s imagination, but not the Bible’s. Ed also saw a little piece of heaven on earth, too. Returning home and

going into business, he started a family and threw himself into being a family man with utter devotion. He was insatiably curious and devoted himself to learning; he was a faithful leader in Christ's Church, serving as deacon and elder; he strengthened his community, giving of his time and treasure to those in need. Like Shakespeare, Ed discovered hell, and he discovered heaven, too; but he remained on earth.

Until now. The one place where Shakespeare and the Bible divorce is in their view of immortality. Shakespeare was always trying to immortalize a pretty girl in one of his poems. In his plays, he thought virtue was immortal, as virtue can outstrip death. Ed would fare well on the virtue front. His devotion to his family, his contributions to the community, his service to Christ's church, his loyalty to friends—all of these things have an impact that will last beyond our gathering this morning. But the Holy Bible doesn't lodge immortality in art or virtue. One of Ed's favorite passages was the lesson we read in John's Gospel, and here is where eternal life truly lies—in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Ed enjoys an eternal reward, not because of what he has done, laudable though it may be, but because of what Christ has done. Even in these last waning days, Ed took comfort and strength from the knowledge that Christ has already gone before him to prepare a place for him, and he now inhabits that very abode. Perhaps he is taking inventory of how many British monarchs actually made it through the Pearly Gates, or maybe he is playing a round of golf with Bobby Jones or he might be gently suggesting to St. Peter that St. Peter not end his sentences with a preposition. But indubitably he joins his voice to those we read about in Revelation who sing praises to the Lamb for all time.

He joins his voice to those we read about in Hebrews, that great cloud of witnesses that cheer us on in our faithfulness. Ed encourages us to keep after Christ, who is the author and perfecter of our faith; Ed encourages us to run the race, that we may impact our families, our community, the Church. We live in an age of Shakespearean tragedy and biblical hope. Ed Hopkins did, as well, and his life is a testimony that faithfulness is a goal well met. He saw the worst humans could do to one another, he was part of the best we can muster, but his faith in Christ is where eternal life lies. That faith is what steadies us now in our loss, and it is what sustains us until that coming day when we are reunited with Ed and reunited with our Lord. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.