

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God of life and death, we live in both. We are mindful of how you made life and you made it to be limited. We have a finite amount of time to be on this earth, to be your children, to be kind and loving to all those you created blessedly. We have a finite amount of time to live life abundantly for us and for all. Indeed, you made every moment to be treasured, to be blessed, to be full of love and opportunity, but we often treat the moments as unlimited and ordinary. Forgive us, Loving God, for our tendency to not live in the present and accept it as a gracious gift from you. Help us to make each moment have its meaning and to be the energy that brings meaning to others' moments. We are one in Christ; let us be united in love and caring for those around us. Hear our prayers, O God.

When we are in joy, when we suffer loss, we are yours. The world tells us how to be: how to be strong, how to deny loss, how to push down grief so it does not get in our way. But those things do not help us to live fully; they help us to maintain an unfaithful image. Help us, God, to be fully who we are, mixing times of loss and times of gain into a full, faithful life. We know you are there, even though we must walk through the darkest valley from time to time. May we walk through those valleys with courage, with strength, with hope, for we lose so much in life, but it is never the final answer. We pray all these things in the name of the Lord that journeys with us through the darkest of valleys and helps us to find new life along the way, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray as one, saying...

SERMON

I had a professor in college, his name was Dr. Babcock, who kinda became one of my heroes. He not only was a brilliant teacher, he was a brilliant human being. His classes on the Greek and Roman World and the origins of the Islamic World were very interesting, but

we'd often chat about *Star Trek*, in and out of class. One day, wearing his Starship Enterprise tie and making *Star Trek* example in class, another instructor in the room, poo-pooing him, called *Star Trek* just a TV show. Without a beat, he dismissed the point, saying simply, "*Star Trek* is eternal." The way he taught and made sense of things made his joke somewhat true. Gene Roddenberry's vision of the future affected how we see what it means to be human, what it means to live fully, what it means to die well.

That fact has been with me my whole life. My favorite movie of all time has to be *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*. I actually have been reflecting on this movie and its effect on my life the last few weeks, and I believe that this movie helped define my ministry from a young age. It helped me see how we understand the length of our lives, what it means to have a vocation that celebrates us and those around us, and what it means to grapple with our inevitable end in death. I truly believe that the voice of God and the movement of the Holy Spirit can come any time, any place, whether or not something contains references to God or Christ's name in it. This is one of those times. I saw *Star Trek II* for the first time on TV when I was young, say about 7 or so. That Christmas Eve, I got the VHS in my stocking. For some, *Star Trek II* was only half of the story, to see Spock die and left behind on the Genesis Planet. For me, it was the more important story: the story of grappling, of growing, of understanding life at every age. It's easy to follow Kirk's route, mature and wise, brilliant at what he does, but forgetting an important principle: death is inevitable. It cannot be cheated. He teaches that fact of life with smug confidence but forgets it himself, only to be truly understand when Kirk loses his best friend. Let me tell you a little about my favorite movie and how it shaped my ministry, look at how scripture upholds this perspective, and find how we can best live in light of this story and the timelessness of scripture.

The movie is an ongoing teaching moment for the teachers and the students. The story is set fifteen years after the television series, and so much has changed from the characters we knew. Captain Kirk had been promoted to Admiral. The aging Admiral Kirk celebrates another birthday with regret. He feels his growing age, tied to a desk when his greatest desire is to be in command of a starship. The Enterprise, now in command of Captain Spock, is on a training mission full of cadets. Kirk particularly squabbles with one cadet, the Vulcan Lieutenant Saavik, who disputes the application of a test that all the cadets must face: the no-win scenario. She feels there is no such thing as the no-win scenario and is angry that she cannot win. Kirk disagrees, telling her it's a test of character, something all commanders might face. "How we deal with death," he says, "Is at least as important as how we face life, wouldn't you say?" This training mission ends when a former foe of Kirk, the genetically enhanced superman Khan whom he encountered 15 years prior, takes control of another starship, the Reliant, and goes out looking for Kirk, who passed judgment on him fifteen years ago. What gets caught in the middle is a scientific experiment the Reliant was working on, called the Genesis Device, that can transform a lifeless planet into a world brimming with life. Khan finds where this was being developed by a former romantic interest of Kirk and his son. Khan steals this device and intends to use it. It's up to the Enterprise to stop him. After a sneak attack that disables the Enterprise, Kirk has to fight back: too much is at stake. They trick the Reliant into a nebula, where the highly damaged Enterprise can fight the less damaged Reliant on equal footing. Kirk is able to disable Reliant, but Khan still has the Genesis Device. Khan is spiteful, activating the Genesis Device toward explosion. The crippled Enterprise is unable to get away. The warp drive is offline, and the only way to fix it is to go into the radiation-

filled engine room. It's a one-way ticket. Spock, driven by logic, takes the self-sacrificing decision to repair the system himself. Knocking out the always-emotional Dr. McCoy, he jumps into the engine room and gets to work. At the last second, the warp drive activates, and the Reliant explodes as the Enterprise flies away. The explosion of the Genesis Device gives birth to a new planet out of the nebula, which they call the Genesis Planet. As the crew watches new life come to be, Dr. McCoy calls Kirk from the engine room to hurry down. Kirk looks at Spock's chair, finds it empty, and realizes. Herushes to the Engine Room and separated by layers of glass, they say their goodbyes. "The needs of the many outweigh..." "The needs of the few." "Or the one." At Spock's funeral, Kirk's haunting voice pays tribute. "Of my friend I can only say this: of all the souls I have encountered in my travels, his was the most...human." Spock's coffin is sent to rest on the Genesis Planet.

Kirk recognizes his hypocrisy after the funeral. His son David recognizes the truth: "You never have faced death." He responds, looking absolutely defeated, "No, not like this. I haven't faced death. I cheated death. I tricked my way out of death and patted myself on the back for my ingenuity." Through this recognition and his son's support, the movie ends with Kirk looking longingly at the Genesis Planet and repeating a line from the book Spock gave him for his birthday. That line is from *A Tale of Two Cities*, by Charles Dickens, where the character Sidney Carton sacrifices himself: "'Tis a far, far better thing I do than I have ever done before. 'Tis a far better resting place I go to than I have ever known." With this comfort in mind, Kirk has better come to terms with who he is and the realities of life. He has finally faced the no-win scenario and finally recognized that "how we deal with death is at least as important as how we deal with life."

Believe me, I love movies as a good distraction. But even more, I love them as a piece of art, something that can speak to more of our lives than just leisure time. They inform all of life. They show us incredible journeys that we often undertake in less profound but not less meaningful ways. As one character said in the Amazing Spider Man, every story, no matter how you may classify it, has one and only one main plotline: the question "Who am I?" This movie is no different. We like movies because they entertain but they also speak to us something greater about life. By the end of this movie, Kirk comes to understand better who he is as a person, as a human being that recognizes death is natural and inevitable, and he comes to peace with it. That should be our lesson too.

Star Trek may lack a religious perspective on death by itself, but scripture speaks the same message this movie does in a different way. No other Psalm is more beloved than Psalm 23. The Good Shepherd protects and nourishes. No other book has been more debated than that of Job. Job loses everything. Both of these speak of trust in God. That is important, but to look at that and that alone also hides an important fact. The faithful response to loss is more than trust in God. While both the one under the Good Shepherd's care and Job seek comfort in God, they do so recognizing that it is inevitable to walk in the darkest of times, the shadow of death. Psalm 23 is comforting, but it does not deny the reality of times of loss and struggle. Scripture says, "Though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil." Let's take scripture on its own terms. It does not claim that one will never walk through the darkest valleys. It only says that we will fear no evil with the Good Shepherd. God will always be with us, but God's presence does not negate the fact that we have to walk through very dark times. Job lost everything. He didn't suck it up. He grieved. As was customary, he tore his clothes. That was a sign of grieving. His focus was

on God, but that didn't mean that he was not going to experience pain or the darkness of loss. Admiral Kirk did his best to deny that fact, and when he could deny it no longer, he found there was new life around the corner. He had to traverse it, but the darkest valley leads to new life.

As a pastor whose gifts focus on pastoral care, I recognize that grief and grieving is integral. We need it as human beings and as people of faith. Scripture confirms it: it's not only OK but necessary to grieve. Time and time again, the characters in scripture face loss and grieve over it because that's what God created us to do. But grief often has a bad vibe around it. It's a vulnerable thing to grieve, and that seems to make it bad. Culturally, we're messed up. We get this strange idea that to trust in God means that grieving cannot and should not occur. We need to be "strong" and not let grief show. Grief is weakness. None of these are true. In fact, they all make us feel worse in the grand scheme of things.

Example A: Admiral Kirk. He senses that there is much more behind than there is ahead, and so, he grieves at this but doesn't know it and, frankly, doesn't want to know it.

Grief happens throughout life in big and small ways. It's not just when there is a death. The bottom line is that grief happens with change or even the fear of change. Think about any situation possible. Whenever something changes, we naturally gain and lose something. For example, we consider it a joyful thing to attend a graduation. Indeed, it's the celebration of a new phase of life. At the same time, graduation signals the end of something. It is a loss of being in school and that lifestyle, perhaps the loss of friends one doesn't see anymore. It's natural to grieve right along side our celebration. We naturally fear change because...grief. We sense loss, and when we lose something that we care about, we grieve, whether we know it or not. We grieve as we age; there are some things we did

before that we can't do any more. You no longer live with your parents. You can't live that life in college. You can't do that job the way you had in the past. You don't have the physical capacity to move about as you used to. All of these things are a loss. All of these things are grieved. Whether we easily realize it or not, these are grieving moments. We grieve whether we choose to or not, and those times and must be respected. After all, grief is a holy and wonderful act ordained and blessed by our Creator God and shown in Jesus.

Now that I have fully outed myself as a ginormous nerd, I am not ashamed whatsoever. *Star Trek II* has meant a lot to me, in who I am as a person and how I came to be standing here as a pastor. It's not just a science fiction movie; it's a movie about how to live life well. The story walks a very human path with Admiral Kirk, how he sought to be the wise teacher. He knew all answers, and he thought he was invincible. At the same time, he knew something wasn't right. He knew that he was losing something important but didn't want to acknowledge it. It took him an experience with the true no-win scenario to come to peace with the realities of life. He knew on one level that aging, death, and grief were inevitable, but he ran away from it until he could no longer. There is always an inevitable reckoning. Once he did, there was new life. At the same time, we can say the same old platitudes about death and loss and say how we recognize the whole shebang, but until we come to experience it throughout life, we find that simply saying it doesn't create the same reality. God is with us and will always be with us, but we have to walk the difficult valley of loss, death, and grief to find new life along the way. By coming to terms with these realities time and again, encountering them not as fearful enemies but natural certainties, we discover there is always new life to be found. Thanks be to God! Amen and Amen.