

April 25, 2010 the Reverend Dr. Catharine Randall Christ Church
(Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 23)

Strength for the Journey

I am a hospice volunteer. I have been for years, working with the quick turnover wards, as they call them, at Danbury Hospital, where people are brought in who have no family or friends and are expected to die within 24 hours. I've also served in Alzheimer's units, and in Greater Waterbury Hospice. My job is God-given: to try to help those *in extremis*, those "actively dying," to make meaning out of their lives.

Hospice is a wonderful organization, a blessing to so many. But for years the American Medical Association in the United States fought hospice. Begun in England in the early 1960s, hospice was so named because "hospice" means "way-station", a resting- place along the way, a still point in our pilgrimage. The AMA was threatened by the concept of holistic dying, just as, today, many conventional doctors, or allopaths, are distrustful of the notion of homeopathy, the healing of the whole person by natural and sometimes spiritual means.

Elizabeth Kubler Ross' book *On Death and Dying* probably played the single biggest role in getting hospice accepted in the United States. Her book argued that we all go through

a series of stages on the way to death, and that we should be shepherded through these tough times by caring people who have the insight and heart necessary to help make sense of the life that has gone before the death that is soon to come. Kubler-Ross made the powerful case that, as a person is dying, not only should his pain be assuaged, but also the cry of her spirit should be heard and attended to.

One of my most poignant memories is of a Swiss woman with whom I was paired in Southbury. She had dementia and did not respond to English, but when I spoke to her in French, many memories returned, and she was able to tell me of her Protestant upbringing, her minister father, her first sportscar—a roadster--, the man who painted her portrait when she was young and vivacious and redhaired ... Her memories came flooding back.

Today's Scripture passages are all about death and dying, and they are among the Bible verses customarily read at funerals. At one point in my life as a priest in Woodbury, I was asked so frequently to do funerals that the Munson Lovetere Funeral Parlor started jokingly calling me "Burying Catharine!" But I liked it, weird as that sounds. It's not ghoulish. I like being around people who are dying because it is then that they are stripped bare, vulnerable, in need and without pretense— utterly honest with you and with themselves.

When my Swiss friend was dying, virtually her last words to me were “Je ne sais pas pourquoi on vit.” (“I do not know why we live.”) You see, she had lost her faith and, toward the end, in pain and confusion, she was struggling to make some meaning of her entire life. As she looked at me, fearful and perplexed, I realized what she wanted. If she could not now — or yet — believe, she knew that I did. I was called to bear belief for her. I said to her, “Paulette, je le sais. Et je te verrai aux cieux.” (“Pauline, but I know, and I will see you in Heaven.”) She smiled, and reached up and touched my cheek and turned her face on the pillow, and was very peaceful. Several hours later, she died.

We had come to a mutual understanding. While all may not make sense, perhaps not all wound are healed, yet there is a sharing, a leading by the one and a following by the other, a walking along the way to the final destination that is willingly undertaken and engaged in. This is what our Gentle Shepherd does. We are given strength for the journey, the last trip we will ever take , and we know where it will take us.

It has been said that, instead of canceling life, death is its fruit –and an expression of our most intimate and unique strivings for meaning. Perhaps we can come not to fear death, but rather to see life as a preparation for death. The notion of a Good Death is alien to the 21st century, but was understood in earlier times. If we so dream a future for ourselves, shape our careers, mold our families, cultivate our ambition, why should we not similarly craft for ourselves the circumstances of our death? I believe that positive

thinking has an effect not only on our lives, but also on our deaths. For instance, I choose to die at sunset, on a warm spring day, my husband at my side, two big glasses of Canadian beer in our hands, having lived the day fully, having no regrets. Who knows? Perhaps this good death will come to pass – just as I once dreamed of being a professor and of writing books, and then yearned to preach the Gospel and to have my own horse in my back pasture. Why not dream death as we dream life? Why not let our Shepherd lead us through all the green pastures of the day, into the quiet shadow, and trust His leading? Will He not bring us through to a pleasant land?

“For the Lamb will be their shepherd, and He will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from every eye.” Jesus, Gentle Shepherd, lead us.

Paulette, I'll see you in Heaven.