

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – October 31, 2021 – Committed to Memory  
Micah 4:1-4 and Ephesians 1:11-12, 15-23**

It is often said that elephants never forget, and I have to imagine that this saying originates, at least in part, from the ways in which elephants respond to death. Because, in many ways, they remind us of ourselves. Which begs the question, “do other animals really grieve?”<sup>1</sup>

Anthropologist Barbara King notes that “to qualify as grief, surviving individuals who knew the deceased must alter their behavioral routine. They might eat or sleep less, or act listless, or agitated. They might attend their friend’s corpse.”

<sup>2</sup> In a human context, one “might miss several days of work following the death of a parent or sibling,” and mourners might gather for a day or two to pay their respects and grieve.<sup>3</sup>

So, too, “after a young elephant dies, its mother sometimes acts depressed for many days, slowly trailing far behind her family.”<sup>4</sup> Elephants also participate in simple burials, sometimes covering their dead “with soil and vegetation.” And “an

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/article/animal-grief/>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

elephant family might for several days return to the body of the deceased.”<sup>5</sup> Then, months, or even years later, that same family might “visit the grave.”<sup>6</sup> Much like humans, the trajectory of elephant lives may “be permanently altered by the death of a key family member.”<sup>7</sup>

This all reminds me of a meaningful experience from my past. Over two decades following America’s military withdrawal from Vietnam, I participated in school trip to Washington, D.C., where we visited the Vietnam Memorial. I was deeply saddened to see so many names listed there, and I was awed by the reverential silence of those who had gathered to pay their respects. Near the site were a number of visible reminders that Prisoners of War and those soldiers Missing in Action would not be forgotten. The message was clear: even when one is no longer with us, they are still committed to our memory.

Friends, it is amazing, isn’t it, that we remember fondly those whom we have never met? This was true of me and my classmates at the Vietnam Memorial. And it is true of us as the family of faith. Later in this service, we will lift up some of the saints of God. And we will highlight the importance of their legacy with the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

knowledge that even now, centuries, or perhaps a millennia or more later, these individuals remain committed to our collective memories. And we acknowledge that their words and actions will continue to shape and mold the Christian community of both the present and the future. For they, along with their accomplishments, will not be forgotten.

Today, we place stones on the Communion Table in their memory, in order that we might recall the firm foundation and solid rock upon which we stand. And we remember, one scholar reminds us, “the way to Christ for all the saints is the same. The first step is to hear the word of truth. It is then followed by a trustful acceptance of the one who speaks this word. The third step is the seal of the Holy Spirit” and “the Christian’s resolve to follow in the way of Christ and in the fellowship of his church.”<sup>8</sup>

Through it all, we know where we are going, and so we have hope.<sup>9</sup> Yet, in our grief, we long for the calm and steady witness of others. Several months following the death of her mother, a woman knocked at the church office door of minister PHEME PERKINS. “The woman, in obvious distress, said that she had to have

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<sup>8</sup> Cleophus J. Larue, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Volume 3*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 436.

<sup>9</sup> PHEME PERKINS, *Ephesians, The New Interpreter’s Bible Volume XI*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 2000), 386.

an answer to a question because one of her siblings was in real despair over it. The problem? Given the billions and billions of people who had died since humans first emerged on earth and were likely to die before the end of the world, she feared that her mother had to be lost in so vast a crowd. Given the enormous number of people jammed into heaven, she could not see how God could restore the bond of love, the relationship between the mother and her children.”<sup>10</sup>

Perkins assured her that “as far back as the Middle Ages this question has been argued. People have wondered how God could get the bits of bodies shattered by martyrdom or accident back together again. It must be by God’s creative power, they concluded. Today we have an even easier way to imagine it. Think of that DNA code or the capacity of computers to store, sort, find patterns, and match data.”<sup>11</sup> If “human brains can figure out ways to do that, God can restore bodies and families.”<sup>12</sup> For God holds the creative power “to touch, be embedded in, or linked to every single part of the universe.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Pheme Perkins, *Ephesians, The New Interpreter’s Bible Volume XI*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 2000), 387.

<sup>11</sup> Perkins, 387.

<sup>12</sup> Perkins, 387.

<sup>13</sup> Perkins, 387.

Friends, “the future redemption is more than a hope; it is a certainty, based on the ‘inheritance’ that is guaranteed by the ‘seal of the Spirit.’”<sup>14</sup> And just as those departed are now committed to our memories, so too are we committed to God’s. So let us turn to the Lord with gladness, and give thanks that we will never be forgotten. May it be so, and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.

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<sup>14</sup> David W. Johnson, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Volume 3*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 433.