

From the Pastor's Desk

Burial Practices

What is dying?
I am standing on the seashore.
A ship sails to the morning breeze and starts for the ocean.
She is an object and I stand watching her
Till at last she fades from the horizon,
And someone at my side says, "She is gone!" Gone where?
Gone from my sight, that is all;
She is just as large in the masts, hull and spars as she was when I saw her,
And just as able to bear her load of living freight to its destination.
The diminished size and total loss of sight is in me, not in her;
And just at the moment when someone at my side says, "She is gone!",
There are others who are watching her coming,
And other voices take up a glad shout,
"There she comes!" - and that is dying.

"The Sailing Ship"

by Bishop Charles Henry Brent (1862-1929)

It seems that talking about death ... our death ... yours and mine ... should be easier for us Christians who believe life is a pilgrimage, a journey and the final destination is over the horizon. Talking about death takes some of the sting out of death. So I pose a question:

What do you plan to have done with your body once you sail over the horizon? It's a morbid question but a necessary one in order for each of us to take responsibility for not only our life, but our death too.

When considering this question most people see two options: traditional burial or cremation. Cremation was once looked down upon – all that fire seemed too hellish and how would God manage to gather the dust particles for the resurrection? But now cremation is becoming more popular as people have answered these questions satisfactorily for themselves, while finding the price tag more acceptable too. Within the Christian tradition either option is acceptable.

The word "human" comes from "humus" - which is defined as "the organic component of soil formed by the decomposition of leaves and other plant material by soil microorganisms". So, humans came from humus – soil. "God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew life into his nostrils." Genesis 2:7 Science also teaches that the building blocks of life came out of earth. Because humans came out of the earth it makes sense that they go back into the earth after death.

Green Burial

When considering traditional burial or cremation, there is a third option – Green Burial, which is the real “traditional” burial. Embalming bodies, metal caskets and concrete vaults are all relatively recent practices. Embalming was developed around 1860 by wealthy people who wanted their sons who lay dead on a Civil War battle field preserved during the return home for burial. Metal caskets and concrete vaults were developed later when those materials were available.

When I buried our beloved dog Joey last September, I found it amazing how quickly the top of his grave sank about ten inches. It only took a couple of months for his body to decompose. Underground with no hardware around it, bodies quickly decompose as small organisms find life in their remains. Most cemeteries require vaults because of the inconvenience of the surface of the grave sinking and the need to put more soil on it. Neither embalming, a casket or a vault are require by law for burial.

Green Burial is placing the body in the ground with nothing around it except a shroud or a wood or cardboard box. I am attracted to it because I like the idea of my body giving life to other organisms in the same way a fallen tree gives life to other trees and organisms in the forest. For millennia this is how most humans were buried – in the soil without a casket or a vault.

You could drive a car about 5000 miles with the amount of energy it takes to cremate a body. One should check with county or State regulations when deciding how to deal with the ashes as they are toxic to some environments. Also, if the ashes end up in someone’s closet, which is often the case, they may end up in a dumpster.

Embalmed bodies in an air tight casket and vault can take a long time to decompose. Abraham Lincoln was embalmed after his assassination in 1865. In order to prevent anyone from stealing his body, Lincoln's eldest son Robert called for Lincoln's exhumation in 1901 so his body could be sealed in a concrete vault in the burial room of his tomb in Springfield, Illinois. Fearing that his body may have been stolen in the interim, Lincoln’s coffin was opened, and his features were still recognizable, thirty-six years after his death. Although a body wants to decompose, it is difficult without contact with soil, air or water, which caskets and vaults make difficult if not impossible.

I spoke with a funeral home director who indicated a green burial is possible ain our area. Unlike our city cemeteries, a portion of Mountain Vale does not require a vault or casket.

At a later date we will have an adult forum with further information about end of life issues and burial practices. Green burial is becoming more popular these days because of its simplicity and cost.

~PB