

With Thanksgiving for the Life of
Helen Jeanette Remington
April 2, 1936 + July 2, 2020
Romans 8:31-39; Hebrews 12:1-2

The shape of this funeral service—the Bible readings, the music so far, the overall outline—was what was used for the funeral of Helen’s first husband, Roger, and it was her plan to use these same things for her own service.

It’s interesting to me to think of having that similarity or matching pattern, along with all that has happened since then, and to reflect on what has changed and what hasn’t.

People around Advent and the MCC still talk lots about Roger’s death and funeral, because it was such a surprise and because he was so young with a young family and because the congregation so very rarely had funeral services then.

Clearly, we wouldn’t say much of any of that about Helen. We can celebrate a wonderful full life. We celebrate two good marriages, celebrate her dedication as a mother and delight as a grandmother. We celebrate all kinds of dear friendships, celebrate two good careers and a retirement. We celebrate her sense of humor and that sparkle and gleam in her eye that was with her throughout it all.

We may not have been ready for this to be the end—I know I am mourning and lamenting that I didn’t and don’t get to visit with her more—and yet it certainly wasn’t a surprise. From the very first time I met her, she was talking about recognizing dementia and dealing with the changes it brought and courageously sharing.

There’s something in comparing the two lives of Helen and Roger and the trajectory that is strikingly different for then having the same Bible readings and hymns and such for both of their funeral services, including with Sybil serving as a musician at both.

In the comparison, I’m also struck by the simple fact that Roger’s service led by Andrew Rogness was a long time ago—forty years last month, I’m told. It’s striking that Helen had so much life left after that. It’s striking for me as her

pastor, because I’ve only been here a tenth of that time and was barely a toddler when Roger died. For all that’s changed in the world, it’s a long stretch of time to be singing and hearing the same thing.

And so a main thing that strikes me is the persistence of this faith of ours, that words written two millennia ago on the other side of the planet still speak to us now, and tunes written for a totally different context—like the abolition of slavery for “Amazing Grace”—still resonate and reverberate in our hearts and in our world now.

This is not the context any of us want, to be saying goodbye to Helen period, much less during the pandemic, when we can’t be together to grieve and support each other in the way we long for and need and know is right, when there aren’t hugs, when we have to make do with what is possible, even with decisions—including from much of the family—that it won’t work to be here and instead to have to watch and participate online. This is not what we want in our lives and world generally. We’re worn out on hearing about how none of us has experienced anything like this before, how there are new normals, how much it has changed us already.

And yet here again today, these words of faith speak into this context, into these times, and God’s word and promise come to us in this very moment: nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Nothing in life. No obstacles of viruses, no distances, no new challenges, no diminishment of dementia, no sudden aneurysms, no tumors, no possessions you’ve accumulated or said goodbye to, no struggles with addictions, no celebrations, no ins and outs of relationships, no twists and turns throughout the years. Nothing in all the bad news we keep receiving. Nothing in life, and not even death itself will separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

It was this faith that allowed Helen to run with perseverance the race of life, the course set before her that no matter what may come, she was safely held in God’s embrace and headed to the glory of the new creation, already convinced and confident in that promise of what is to come.

I'm grateful for this faith that sustained her, faith that made her remember relationships and her leadership in this congregation, including through some challenging times. This faith made her eager to receive the promise again and again in the communion I'd bring to her. This faith was what she and her husband Andy practiced as they prayed together, prayed in amounts of gratitude, but also prayed as he dealt with cancer and as they made decisions about life, and as they continued the course of life together before them.

It is this faith that Helen held that holds her now, finds her not at a loss but in the very fulfillment of the promise. The persistence of this far-reaching promise was voiced by the Arabic hymnwriter of our first hymn 1300 years ago as he proclaimed again today, "From death to life eternal, from sin's dominion free, our Christ has brought us over with hymns of victory" (*The Day of Resurrection*, ELW 361).

And that promise isn't just for Helen. We repeat it and join the glad refrain because it carries each of us through our lives, through the celebrations and the sorrows, through the routines and also the new normals, through all the surprises that come and changes we have to face, through our very best and our worst. It's a promise for you that won't be stopped, because even death cannot undo it. Nothing will separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.