Sermon for Paul Ingle

There are no words. There are no words. That is the phrase that comes to us all as we gather to say a loving farewell to Paul Ingle. There are no words for our sorrow. Yet we come to hear the Word. We come to hear the Word of God whose “ways are not our ways;” the story of God’s love for us whose “thoughts are not our thoughts.” We come to hear the Word of God, so that the story of our pain and loss may find its place in God’s story. Most of all, we come not to hear but to experience the Word of God among us. We yearn to know powerfully this day the God who loved us in such a way as to become one of us, to take on our pain and sorrow, to live the very depth and height of all that is human. We come to draw near to Jesus who suffered and died for us all, out of love for us all. We come to connect our troubled, confusing story to his saving, eternal story.

That very Jesus who welcomes us here in this place welcomes Paul as well. There is another part of the story that we have not heard yet. That is the story of the wounded arms of Jesus open wide to receive Paul. I can hear Jesus saying, “I know it got too tough for you there. The struggle was harder that anyone knew. It is over now. The door is open. Welcome home. I love you.” So it is that Paul has now entered the life of the resurrection, the life where sorrowing and pain are no more, neither sighing, but life everlasting.

Even as we hear the assurance of our faith, we know that this is not the way we would have chosen to write the story. I am sure that Paul would agree. I am sure that he would urge us not to hasten the journey into the arms of Jesus. He would tell us to kiss the good earth and embrace all the pleasures and struggles of this life with one another. He would urge us to live this life fully all the days ahead and remember him with fondness along the way. He would urge us never to shrink from the struggles or the pain.

Indeed this is not the way we would have chosen to write the final chapter of Paul’s life story. If I were his biographer, I would remember his baptism at St. Mary’s Church and his days growing up in High Point; his years at the Asheville School; and his time at that school near Duke in Chapel Hill. I would record the date of the blessing of his marriage to Susan, the births and baptisms of Gene and Ashley and all the times of joy and promise in his life. I would remember and speak the truth about his successes and failures in the world of business and commerce. I would celebrate his style and flair. NASCAR would be part of the story and we would read of boats and planes and fine cars. In the story I would write there would be more than one chapter on his generous heart and his love of God and God’s imperfect Church. Paul never bought into “political correctness” (God love him) so, I am convinced that his life in the Episcopal Church these last thirty or so years was an uneasy peace. The story line of Paul’s life would include the marriages of Gene and Ashley and the great joy of his grand children in all their charm and promise. I would write a story of intelligence, creativity, laughter, and spiritual grace. I like the biography that I would write of Ira Paul Ingle, Jr.

We come today face to face with the truth at the heart of life—that we do not write our own stories—not any of us. We cannot rewrite the story of our life while we live, and no one can do that for us after we die. We cannot rewrite an episode of life, even Paul’s horrific death. Nor do we understand the story
of life that weaves darkness into our light; that takes us through pain and sorrow and loss before we can know joy and the peace of God which is no peace at all. Finally, the story of life in all its mystery is God’s story. All the pain of death, all the agony of loss is drawn into the very heart of God. God’s story transforms our story and draws us finally into a larger world, a larger mystery than what we can see before us this day.

In Paul’s biography I would begin and end with the truth that Paul was and is and will always be God’s beloved child. Made in God’s image, Paul in life and in death is a child of God, baptized and marked as God’s own forever. God has always been the great protagonist in the drama of Paul’s life. God has always been present. That is a solid truth for us all. Even when we cannot pray, when we cannot call forth God’s presence for ourselves, God is still there, however unseen. We are never alone wherever we are, whatever pain we may know, whatever thorn tears our flesh apart. As the psalmist said: Where can I go then from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I climb to heaven, you are there; if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.” We are never alone, even when we pass through the lonesome valley of life. God is with us even when our eyes are clouded and our hearts are brought low. God is with us when we are rejected by others—and even when in the last moments of life we reject ourselves. It is so hard to hear the truth we find in Romans that “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Let those words be for us today a bold confession of faith; yes, an assurance of our faith.

I remember well the first time I saw the poem “Footprints.” I was living in Asheville, and the poem was posted on the bulletin board at the school for disabled children that my infant daughter had just entered. It was a message in a bottle from a survivor, from some heart-broken and heart-stretched parent who had walked a painful journey and discovered mysterious footprints in the sand. There was the evidence that an unseen God had carried a helpless soul through an impossible journey. That survivor knew the presence of God only at the other end of the road. God is here with us now as well, bearing us down the path of life and death, leading us to the resurrection that is ours in Jesus Christ.

Because God is ever present, God wept for Paul even before we wept. God did not take Paul. Paul took his own life—but God was there to receive him. God’s love was there at every moment. The very heart of God was broken even before our tears began to flow. Ours is a God who loves us in such a way that God’s Son came and died among us and for us. Ours is a parent God who wept for the death of a child upon a cross. Ours is a God who weeps with us, who brings our pain into the very pain of the cross. The story of our faith is the story of the Cross one day defeated by the Empty Tomb of Easter.

There are no words to explain the pain we know. There are no words to make sense of a mystery beyond us all. We can only look to Jesus the Son to guide us to the Father. It has been said: “Jesus did not come to remove suffering or to explain it away. He came to fill it with His presence.” (Jean Paul Claudel) If Jesus could not remove suffering, neither can we. We can only draw near to the pain and let Jesus fill it with his loving presence. In that presence comes our healing.

There is a blessing that goes like this: “O God of pilgrims, give us always a table where we can tell our story and sing our song.” That place is prepared for us. Jesus tells us that he has prepared a place for us,
a place with generous rooms for us all. The Welcome Table is prepared for us all—a table for gathering, a table for sharing the story of life, a place to sing a song of lament and praise, a table where weary pilgrims can live into God’s story and God’s mystery. Our brother Paul is seated at that table, telling his story and singing his song with all the saints.

We are welcomed now to another table, the table of the Holy Eucharist, for a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. We are invited to feed upon the body and blood of Jesus who died in love for us. May we draw near—not just to hear the Word of God but to partake of the Eternal Word made flesh for our flesh, story for our story, life for our life. May Jesus feed us in the fullness of his love. Come to the table to tell our story and sing our song and to give God thanks for Paul Ingle, God’s child forever.

JAMES BARNEY HAWKINS IV

St. James’ Church, Wilmington, NC, September 9, 2010