

Helen May Funeral

Earlier this month Iowa suffered a straight-line wind storm called a derecho, flattening cornfields and buildings. Hurricane season arrived with two storms bearing onto the southern coast of our country at the same time. Today it's raining. It's almost as if Mother Nature is trying to make up for the loss of one of her greatest forces: Helen Elizabeth May.

She was a strong woman, a lively wife to her husband, a defensive mother of her children, the number one fan at her grandkids' sporting events, and the owner of a vocabulary from which I won't repeat any samples here. She proudly took no painkillers or medications, she and Eddie preserved their marriage through 70 years until he died at the age of 96; his funeral took place here. As one member of the family lamented, Eddie only got 12 years of eternal rest until she showed up again at his side. Helen was a fantastic seamstress; she could make dresses without a pattern; she lies here in the outfit she made with her own hands for her son's wedding. Those abilities made up for her lack of cooking skills, which many people didn't mind because of how well she tended the family bar. She was a Kansas City girl, but later in life she moved to Chicago and Virginia; her health declined over the last couple of years, but she lived to see her 103rd birthday just before those storms battered our country.

The message I got from the family was, "Look, you pick the scripture readings for this funeral." So, let me explain why I thought of these.

The Books of the Maccabees tell about how the Jewish people of the Old Testament fought for and gained back their captured Temple. The building was something precious to them, and they were willing to lose their lives in order to get it. Many of them did lose their lives. But those who loved them, the survivors, looked over the battlefield and made an offering to God, while praying in "atonement for the dead that they might be freed from...sin." That is very much an action that all of you are performing today, on behalf of a woman who felt strongly about her values and relies on her family and friends now to pray for her in the hour of her death.

Near the end of St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, he answered some questions he had received about life after death. He used a variety of metaphors: falling asleep, being changed, rising up. But the one that speaks to our gathering today is clothing. Paul says, "that which is corruptible must clothe itself with incorruptibility, and that which is mortal must clothe itself with immortality." After we die, God will meet us like a gifted seamstress, wrapping our corruptible, mortal bodies with incorruptible, immortal clothing—fashions that never go out of style.

In John's Gospel we hear Jesus's invitation to eat his flesh and drink his blood, which we accomplish whenever we come to the table of the Eucharist. If we do, he promises us eternal life. This was surely good news for a lady known more for drink than food: Someone else is providing the banquet of eternal life.

As we gather to remember Helen, let us be grateful for her life, and let us pray for her redemption. As she provided many stories people love to tell, we pray that she will now take part in the greatest story of all, eternal life with God.

Saturday, August 29, 2020