

Homily at the Memorial Service for Kenneth Bacon;
9/9/09 at the Washington National Cathedral

Readings

Psalm 121

1. I lift up my eyes to the hills; *
from where is my help to come?
2. My help comes from the LORD, *
the maker of heaven and earth.
3. He will not let your foot be moved *
and he who watches over you will not fall asleep.
4. Behold, he who keeps watch over Israel *
shall neither slumber nor sleep;
5. The LORD himself watches over you; *
the LORD is your shade at your right hand,
6. So that the sun shall not strike you by day, *
nor the moon by night.
7. The LORD shall preserve you from all evil; *
it is he who shall keep you safe.
8. The LORD shall watch over your going out and your coming in, *
from this time forth for evermore.

John 14:1-6

Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many mansions. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

Homily

Many faiths teach us that the souls of the departed are restless. They wander the earth, seeking to set right the wrongs done to them or by them in their earthly lives.

Ken is restless. I can't imagine he's interested in vengeance, as is the case with some restless spirits. Surely, though, he'd like to call our attention to things we need to atone for – an unkind word or thoughtless act, to him or to someone he cares about. And he might be seeking ways to express regret, as we all are. The matters that concern him will come to our attention, in ways unexpected and even mysterious, in the time to come. We'll know, in retrospect, that he's been around.

Ken is also restlessly watchful, like God, who, according to Psalm 121, keeps an eye on our goings out and our comings in, both now and always. Ken is watching over the goings and comings of everybody he cares about. This watching requires restlessness, a peripatetic spirit, because Ken's people are scattered over the face of the earth. Also, he's not watching for the sake of watching. He's keeping restless vigil until wrongs are set right. He's watching over refugees and reporters, family and friends, from Brookline to Manhattan to Washington to Iraq to the Swat Valley, and beyond. The God of Psalm 121 is keeping restless vigil with him.

So much of what we've heard today bears witness to these aspects of Ken's character. I believe it was Katie who said he was a "no stone left unturned" kind of guy – not satisfied until every possibility is explored, every hypothesis tested, every effort made, every strategy deployed. And Mr. Waterston noted that Ken saw the world's evil clearly, without flinching, then went on to say, "We can do better," and to think about how. Clear-eyed, restless, watchful.

A couple of years ago Ken started participating in a meal and discussion group for homeless persons we offer at Grace. A fellow choir member invited him to join her team, and he and Darcy came regularly. Ken engaged our homeless guests with enthusiasm and without any apparent apprehension or reservation, bringing his best thinking to the discussion. I can only believe that this Saturday gathering at his church was a stone he hadn't turned over yet. This man who devoted himself to alleviating suffering around the world wanted to see the homeless community of his church with his own eyes. Surely he believed he, and all of us, could do better at addressing the needs, fears and hopes of these homeless friends. His restless spirit impelled him to try.

Today, though, we're thinking less about restlessness than about rest. There's a resting place prepared for Ken, a mansion in his Father's house.

Slowly – it'll take him awhile to get used to the idea - he's settling in there, beginning to take his rest. But he needs to give his restless watchfulness to somebody. He won't fully rest until he does.

That's why we're here. As is always the case with memorials, this gathering has less to do with the person we're grieving that it does with us. "Ken", we say, "give us your restlessness. We're complacent. We don't turn over every stone. We get mired down in fixed and comfortable ways of thinking. To an extent that makes us feel secretly ashamed, we've made peace with injustice. We don't often say, 'We can do better', and when we do, we sometimes don't mean it. Give us your gift. We need it."

Near the end of his life, I reminded Ken of a favorite quotation from Dr. King: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Ken said, "And even a short life has a place on that arc." Soon after, he began listening to Mozart's *Missa Brevis*, and sent, through Darcy's good offices, a powerful and poignant e-mail about its meaning for him. We've heard selections from this sublime work throughout today's service, sung with great love and skill by Ken's friends under the masterful direction of Michael McCarthy. These selections represent, in many ways, Ken's own *Missa Brevis*, a small but indispensable part of a very long trajectory.

It's time for this watchful spirit to close his eyes, to leave a stone or two unturned, to settle into the mansion prepared for him. He's drawing his *Missa Brevis* to a close, taking his place on the long arc, and leaving the further bending of it to us. We here gathered highly resolve to take what he wants to give us. Make us vigilant and restless, Ken. There are lots of wrongs to be righted. In so many ways, as you know so well, we can do better.