



## Online Memorial Services

Biblical background and suggestions for making online memorials meaningful.

Sadly, a loved one has died, and the phone calls begin: “What are we going to do about a funeral?” During this pandemic, the logical answer is to postpone it. But that does not take care of emotional needs right now. [Zoom](#) is an online platform that enables up to 100 people to be on-line together, tell stories, and offer prayers for their loved one and for themselves.

Pastors and priests may be willing to lead family and friends in a time of remembrance. They can certainly offer a written guide for a service that the folks might use. But if that doesn’t feel quite right and families want to save that for a later date when services can be done face to face, there are other options.

Fortunately, in our tradition anyone can conduct a funeral or memorial service. So, there is no right or wrong way to lead them. We do not have a prescribed liturgy for any service so that the leader has the freedom to offer what is needed by the people. Here is some Biblical background and suggestions for making online memorials meaningful.

### Biblical Background and Interpretation

The Bible offers us guidance as to how to celebrate a life. Not only verses that reassure us about our faith in Christ and the promise of life after death, but rather how to compose a service. In his book, [An Introduction to the Old Testament](#), Walter Brueggemann,<sup>1</sup> describes the approach the rabbis used in writing the Hebrew narrative as “imaginative remembering.” They took oral tradition and several sources of written scrolls and wove them together into the Bible we have today.

There are similarities between the accounts of our spiritual ancestors and how we write eulogies. The stories of the patriarchs, matriarchs, prophets, judges, and kings were intended to preserve what God had taught the Hebrew people through their leaders’ lives. So, if we use the wisdom of the scriptures, our goal together is to tell a life story. What did God teach us through her or him? Like our ancestors, we use our imaginations to identify the insights and blessing we will treasure from our loved one’s life.

### Planning the Service

1. Keep in mind the ages and needs of the people that will gather. Will there be children? How can they participate? Will there be older family members that have sacred parts of worship that they will look for (such as singing “Amazing Grace” or saying the Lord’s Prayer)? If “Celebrations of Life” are tradition in your family/circle/congregation, is it important to include that element of celebration, perhaps at the end of the service? Are there individuals who are good at speaking and would be willing to share? How can the service include as many people as possible in making contributions such as reading scripture or singing a song?  
Strange as it may sound, funerals are **for** the living, not for the deceased. Our Presbyterian heritage in liturgy allows us to be creative!
2. Create an outline from which to work that offers direction for the ideas of the service. There needs to be a development of thought for the people: a beginning that gathers people into worship, a middle that focuses on the deceased and our faith, and an end that commends the loved one to God and blesses

participants on their way. Gather all the requests from folks and put them in a meaningful section of the service.

### 3. Service outline

- a. Gathering time: as people pop up on the Zoom meeting at the agreed upon day and time there will be greetings and welcomes all around.
- b. Each home light a candle on the table.
- c. Call to worship can be traditional using verses from Psalm 121 or psalm 90; or it can be participatory with folks announcing where they are.
- d. Song or solo sung by someone or a piece played on a CD or digitally
- e. Choose or write an opening prayer
- f. Read a passage from the bible and/or poems that are meaningful to people
- g. Eulogies and storytelling time. Children could have a favorite photo to show and say why that was an important memory. If there are many shy grandchildren, these can be collected in advance by email and shared by the designated reader. Or have them write a word on a piece of paper to hold up like apple pie, fishing together, Christmas day
- h. Invite people to stand for the Statement of Faith: “Thousands of years ago someone was sitting where we are sitting and were saddened by their loss. Then as they prayed, they felt an embrace that assured them that God shared in their grief and offered hope for all their tomorrows. He wrote what we know as Psalm 23. Let us recite it together to affirm our faith.” The Apostles Creed is also appropriate here.
- i. Another musical selection or this could be the only one
- j. Prayer of Committal
- k. Blessing: The peace of Christ be with you. And also, with you.
- l. Toast (for the Irish at heart); a favorite drink of the deceased; or everyone’s favorite and juice for the children.
- m. Fellowship time for each person to share

### Getting Ready

1. Send an email or letter to all those you need to be invited to determine a day and time
2. Create a survey for them asking for suggestions and ideas
3. Ask for photos to put together into a slideshow via a program like PowerPoint, if there is time and someone with those skills
4. Create the service will all the parts requested and make selections of prayers and music
5. Make a checklist of everything you will need for the service
6. Email an order of worship to family and friends with who is leading what part of the service
7. Invite them to decorate their table with flowers from their garden in addition to the candle or symbols of what their loved one enjoyed. For my mother, there would be a book since she is an avid reader.
8. Record the service for those who cannot be there and for a family history.
9. Use the stories told to write the obituary for the paper.
10. Reuse some of the elements of this online time together for the funeral service, if one is held later, so the two services feel tied together.

### Resources:

#### Calls to Worship

Today we gather to grieve the loss and celebrate the life of our (loved one, grandmother, grandfather, etc.) (name) born on \_\_\_\_\_ and died on \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_.

Each participant says in turn, “I/we are remembering in \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_ State.” (could be a street address if everyone lives in the same town)

Leader: God and God’s love and our love knows no distance and no barrier. United in love, on this day, our hearts are one as we give thanks to God for a life well lived.

Psalm 90: 1,2,3,4,12,14a, 17a (Read Responsively)

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

**Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you formed the earth and world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.**

You turn us back to dust, and say “Turn back, you mortals.”

**For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.**

So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.

**Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love... Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us.**

Psalm 121 (Read responsively)

I will lift my eyes to the hills from where will my help come?

**My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.**

He will not let your foot be moved; He who keeps you will not slumber.

**He who keeps Israel will not slumber nor sleep.**

The Lord is your keeper; The Lord is your shade at your right hand.

**The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.**

The Lord will keep you from all evil; He will keep your life.

**The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.**

### Opening Prayer

Gracious and loving God, we have found many words to describe our living but few that touch the depth of grief with the loss of someone we love. Yet in your comforting presence we have felt your grace and peace that is far more profound than any words or any embrace. Be near to us now as we come in search of new life for ourselves and for one another. That in the moments we share in worship, we might remember \_\_\_\_\_’s life with thanksgiving and then part with your gift of hope for her/him and for each of us. This we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen

### Prayer of Committal

O God, we commend to your care our (mother/father/ grandparent/friend) that we have loved. Remind us that in services of farewell we say goodbye to only that which we can see. Love, faith, hope abide, even more closely than human touch. Reach down to \_\_\_\_ and take her/him to yourself in heaven. Reach into us and comfort our sad hearts. Reach out to us and take us by the hand to lead us from this gathering with hope for all our days ahead. For we trust in the resurrection of your Son our Lord Jesus Christ and believe that You will be between us until we all know what “heaven” means. In his name we pray, Amen.

**Traditional Bible Readings:** Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; I Thessalonians 4: 13,14; Romans 8:38, 39; John 14:1-3

**Alternative Bible Reading:** I like to choose a story or passage that the deceased’s life help illuminate. i.e. Psalm 1 for my Dad; I Corinthians 13 for my grandmother; Ephesians 5:15-20 for my wife’s aunt who was a church organist; a passage from Luke (the doctor) for medical professionals.

<sup>1</sup> An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), Walter Brueggemann, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky 2003, p. 9

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