Here are some of the most comforting words ever spoken.

Prayer: Lord, this day we set our minds on the Father’s House. By your Spirit help us to believe, in the name of Jesus we pray.

In recent months I’ve discovered Channel HGTV with its house renovation shows -- Property Brothers, Flip or Flop, Love it or List it. It’s a nice way to unwind later at night, maybe for some of you, too, especially since it’s not OUR house being worked on! It’s a study of houses, but also of human nature, as often spouses have different things on their “must have/wish lists.” And they have to negotiate; that’s part of the entertainment.

What kind of house do they dream of … one with lots of open space and light, a state-of-the-art kitchen, original hardwood floors, a 3-car garage for the truck, tools and toys…. a soaker tub … a house facing the lake or beach … old with charm, new and modern?

What would YOUR dream house look like? Maybe you are already in it! Jesus spoke of the FATHER’S house. Does the Heavenly Father have a house?

It was at the last supper Jesus and His disciples shared before he would go to the Cross and LEAVE them that He spoke these words. He had tried to prepare them for his death, but now it was upon them and they wondered what would become of him, and what would become of them, and all they had come to know in Him. Jesus said, “Where I am going you cannot come;” and he said one of them at that table would betray him, and another (who seemed to have the most faith) would deny him. What a time that was! Yet almost in the same breath, Jesus said “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” The Message phrases it: “Do not let this throw you!” “BELIEVE in God, in the Living God! Believe also in Me!”

As we know, this passage often is used at memorial services, at the time of death. But I realized the other day, perhaps for the first time, that this encounter was all about the disciples BELIEF in a good, unfailing God … who in His love never wants to be without us. It’s about the power of God to keep what belongs to Him. It’s about a relationship that death itself cannot sever …. and an invitation to a deep trust that the world by itself can never come to!

Jesus said, “In my FATHER’S house there are many rooms.” King James translates the word as “mansions;” our pew Bible has dwelling places. In other words, there’s room! “If it WERE not so” (and Jesus always spoke truth) “would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for YOU? The “you” is plural, “you all,” but it’s also personal. “And if I go and prepare a place for you,” Jesus said, “I will come again and take you to myself so that where I am, THERE you may be also.” That’s just an amazing statement … “Where I am, there you will be also.”
William Barclay writes: “Here in these words a great truth is put in the simplest way; for the Christian, heaven is where Jesus is. We do not need to speculate on what heaven will be like. It is enough to know that we will be forever with him. When we love someone with our whole heart, we are really alive only when we are with that person. It is so with Christ. In this world our contact with him is shadowy, for we can see only through a glass darkly … for we are poor creatures and cannot live always on the heights. But the best definition is to say that heaven is that place where we will always be with Jesus.”

There’s a story about an old country doctor who would make house calls, and take his dog along with him as he visited patients. The dog would remain outside while the doctor went in to see the patient. On one occasion the physician went to the home of a man who didn’t seem to have much time to live. He confessed to the doctor his fears about death and said, “What’s it like when you die?” The doctor thought for a moment … and then he got up and opened the front door. His loyal canine friend, who had been waiting patiently on the porch, gleefully bounded in to join his master. The doctor turned to the man and said, “Do you see this dog? He didn’t have any idea what was on this side of that door. All he knew was that his master was there, and he wanted to be with him. That’s how I feel about death,” the physician continued. “I don’t really know all the whats and hows about dying. I’m not totally sure what’s on the side of that door. But I know WHO is there, who is waiting for me, and that’s enough for me. I’m looking forward to being with my Master.”

This story so reminds me of my Dad, who went home to the Lord last Sunday night in California. He had given his heart and mind so fully to the Master/the Lord when he was 27 years old; and life began in a whole new way, an adventure and journey with Jesus. He never stopped growing, never stopped being amazed at what we experience when we’re in Christ. His goodness, grace, unfailing provision … joy, purpose. He never stopped serving, loving. In these last weeks he would say to nearly everyone who visited him: “Over the years the good Lord has deposited a wealth of treasure in my heart and mind. I celebrate life and reflect on it with immense gratitude to God.”

There were so many tender moments in the days I was there with him in his skilled nursing room, with my Mom who in her advanced dementia was partially understanding what was happening. In the midst of the week out there I was clearing out their home of 20 years. One day my Dad, perhaps thinking about that 20-year home that wasn’t theirs anymore, said quietly: “I have no bed, I have no home, I have no place to go … then I remembered John 14. “In my Father’s house are many rooms, and I go to prepare a place for you.”

I love what C.S. Lewis writes: “Your place in heaven will seem to be made for you and you alone, because you were made for it – made for it stitch by stitch as a glove is made for a hand.”

I have only thankfulness. My Mom and I are so sorry to lose him here, but so happy for Him. I will miss the twinkle, the indomitable spirit, the mentoring in the faith, his regular question after every sermon, “how did it go?” We’ll miss him in countless ways. But he’s home with the Lord, experiencing a verse that he often quoted …

“What no eye has seen nor ear heard nor human heart conceived, these things God has prepared for those who love him.” (I Corinthians 2:9)
Apostle Paul writes, “God has destined us not for wrath but for receiving salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.” (I Thessalonians 5:9-10)

Peter Marshall tells the story of a mother who was trying to explain to her son what it was like to die; her son had asked her. She prayed for words, then answered him. “Do you remember when you were a little boy how you used to play SO hard all day that when night came you were too tired even to put your pajamas on and you’d fall asleep on the couch. That was not your bed, not where you belonged. You would only stay there a little while. Much to your surprise you would wake in the morning and find yourself in your own bed, in your own room. You were there because your father had come with his big strong arms and carried you upstairs to your own room. Death is just like that. We just wake up some morning to find ourselves in another room, our room, where we belong, because the Lord Jesus loves us and died for us.

“For God so loved the world … God so loves each one of us … that He gave His only Son, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16)

So often we gather as a community here in this sanctuary in the face of something we can’t control. There is nothing we can DO about death, at whatever age, young or old. We can’t change it, deny it, or manage it. But Jesus HAS it. And He has us, in the very midst of our fears, our losses, our gains, no matter what! He has ALL of life.

Our youth interns sang a beautiful hymn this morning, the final verse with these words: No guilt in life, no fear in death, this is the power of Christ in me; from life’s first cry to final breath Jesus commands my destiny. No power of hell, no scheme of man, can ever pluck me from His hand, till He returns or calls me home, here in the power of Christ I live …

Yes, the Heavenly Father has a house, not made with hands, eternal in the heavens …and here we groan, longing to be clothed so that what is mortal may be swallowed by life (II Corinthians 5:1ff)

Our Heidelberg Catechism has a beautiful answer. What is your only comfort in life and death? That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul both in life and in death to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood and has set me free from all the power of the evil one. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit he also assures of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for Him.

What comes before us, and is ahead for us, makes every difference in how we live now, freely and faithfully. In one of my Dad’s little notebooks, his final words read, “Our present, our future, our destination, our ‘home’ is in Christ. He will never leave us or forsake us.” In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

*story told by Tim Archer*