

The light inside: A preschooler's uplifting perspective of death

I try not to think about death. When you're prone to hysteria and crippling panic attacks, as I am, mental health professionals advise against it.

We're trained to avert our thinking to something more pleasant. Usually it's not too hard to do.

Lately, Collin has been throwing the term "die" around, usually while he is playing. He likes watching Halloween shows, but Patrick and I decided to keep him away from the scary stuff until he has a better grasp of reality. As it turns out, he understands the gravity of death better than I ever have.

During the children's liturgy last Sunday, he brought up a paper that included a prayer for an angel they knew in heaven. He had (with help, I presume) written the name "Kurt," who was the cat I had from when I was 14 until Collin was 3. It made me smile, especially because the Gospel had me feeling sad.



In Luke 20:27-40, Jesus tells us that marriage doesn't exist in heaven. I don't even like being away from Patrick when we're at work, and now I find out that we won't be together for eternity? How can God be so cruel?

But the small act of Collin showing me his paper about Kurt made me think that I will be reunited with the people I love in heaven, only in a different way.

There may even be sweet treats in heaven, according to Collin, who told his bag of Halloween candy, "You're going to die," as we headed out the door to school.

Once everyone was situated in the car and we were on the road, I asked Collin, "What happens when we die?"

"You can't talk. You can't go potty. You can't see. You can't smell. You can't see the firehouse, and you can't be a firefighter. Or a doctor. Or a dentist. And you can't feel anything."

I was overwhelmed by his response. He understood what it meant to die - to cease to exist. There are no earthly needs or sensibilities. There are no aspirations or emotions.

"Where do you go when you die?" I asked.

"You can't see. But there's a light in your stomach, inside of you."

"But then where do you go?" I asked again.

After a long silence, he said, "Heaven."

"Yes," I told him.

"My friend says sometimes babies go to heaven," he said.

"Yes, that's true," I told him. "And we pray for them."

The light in my stomach faded and dropped. Just the thought of losing a child makes my mind spin, my respiration accelerate, my body ache, and my heart alternate between racing, slowing down and feeling like giving up. I began to panic. Would I need to pull over the car? Would I need to take an emergency dose of anxiety medication? Why can't I handle problems like a normal person? Will I ever be able to overcome my fear and trust the Lord to take care of my family?

I'd drowned out whatever Collin was saying until I heard, "When you get to heaven, Jesus fixes you."

"Yes, he does," I replied.

In death, connection to the concrete world is cut. We lose the five senses, the things we dream of accomplishing, and the people, places, and pets we love. But, we also lose our worries, anxieties, and fears - the things that make this life so painful.

Dying itself isn't scary - it's not like we can avoid it - but worrying about when and how it's going to happen for us or our loved ones is the source of everything that vexes us. As people of faith, we should focus on that light inside of us that will lead us to the ultimate repair shop - heaven. Hopefully the waiting room will be full of familiar faces.