

*A Service of Death & Resurrection for
Nicholas Stango*

Texts:
John 14
James 4

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A Meditation by
James F. McIntire

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Hope United Methodist Church

Eagle & Steel Roads, Havertown, PA

Phone: 610-446-3351

Web: www.HavHopeUMC.org

Office: HopeUMCHavertown@verizon.net

Pastor: HopeUMCPastor@verizon.net

John 14

[Jesus said:] "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. **2** In [God's] house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? **3** 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. **4** And you know the way to the place where I am going."

18 "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. **19** In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. **20** On that day you will know that I am in [God], and you in me, and I in you. **21** They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by [God], and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

25 "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. **26** But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. **27** Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

James 4

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? **2** You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. **3** You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

13 Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money." **14** Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. **15** Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that." **16** As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. **17** Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.

Psalm 16:8

"I have set the Lord always before me; because [God] is at my right hand, I will not be shaken."



"Pastor Jim, Pastor Jim! What's goin' on?" Almost any phone call I made to Nick brought that response. Nearly every day for the past 4 or so years I've heard that greeting. Whenever he saw me in person, though, the greeting was usually more like "Dude!"

Whenever I got to the church office and he was in the building, I knew that we would sit for awhile in my study and the conversation would go from the stock market to gun violence to how many toilets he had fixed that day to how proud he was of his children to when was I going to clean up my office to him buying another mini-van.

"Well, you probably have work to do and I'm holdin' you up." And then we'd talk for another half-hour.

"Wanna get lunch?" When I could do it, we would often end up at Zac's where we would get a couple of burgers and fries and continue our stream of consciousness, train of thought, ramblings while he sweated buckets as we ate. (I never understood that about him. The first time I asked about the sweat he gave me that look and shrug – I never asked again!)

“When you gonna fix that Spitfire, dude?” “What’s happening at Hope this week?” “Man, Sunday was great. Did you meet those visitors?”

“You know what? I just don’t get Pilate.” That’s the question that kept bugging him. “He made his decision based on administrative expedience. What’s up with him? Didn’t he understand who he had in front of him?”

Nickster. Nickmeister. Nickelodeon. Nicky Nick. Nick was my friend. I said this on Sunday at worship. Men don’t make close friends easily – we have to work at it. Nick was that guy who I loved so much that I let him *think* he knew more trivia than I did. Nick and I, for the past 4 or so years, have had something of a bromance going on. And I can’t even imagine another day without “Pastor Jim, Pastor Jim!”

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not be afraid.” (John 14)

My heart is troubled. And I am afraid.

Nick and Colleen and the kids joined Hope just before I arrived on the scene in July 2008. On my first Sunday here, I think Lily and Alex and Nathan were the only children in worship – Lily made me a welcome card which I still have in my “Positive Comments” folder in my study. Shortly after I arrived, though, Nick lost his job. We weren’t so close 5 years ago, but we talked about it and we prayed about it.

Nick started his work as a handyman until he could figure out what to do next. As you all know, that soon became a full venture and he soon added to that his work as our sexton here at Hope. I can’t tell you how many times Nick told me how this had worked out perfectly for him and that he couldn’t imagine going back to a high-pressure executive job.

Although there were occasional times when he asked “Why am I doing this?” and he was ready to give up the glamour of life as a church sexton and find a marketing position, those times were few and usually only after he had fixed a broken toilet for the 5th time or mopped up the floor in Thomas Hall after a flood or vacuumed the hay I brought in for the Christmas pageant.

But mostly, he loved what he did – not because he was getting rich doing it – but because it gave him time with his family that he had never had before. How deeply he loved Colleen – he told me how hard he worked to convince Ms. O’Neill to go out with him all those years ago – how hard they have worked and grown together – how their love flexed and adjusted as the years moved ahead.

And, oh, how he loved Lily and Alex and Nathan. My friend Tim Dalton related to me that just a week ago, on Christmas Eve he was sitting in the pew next to Nick, and that it was clear that he was so proud that night as Lily sang a solo, Alex read scripture, and Nathan sang with the Children’s Choir. Nick would tell me over and over again that to see his children growing into the people that they are becoming was the most amazing thing he could ever imagine. And it was all because he lost his job ...

And how many times he told me the importance of this church family to him. How he never expected to get as involved as he had at Hope. How he never thought his faith would grow in the way that it did over these past 5 years. How after he lost his job, he had a conversation with Bill Engler, our Lay Leader at the time, who said to Nick something like “Turn it all over to God. God will get you through this. Have faith and you’ll be okay.” He did. He was okay. It amazed him and strengthened him and got him through the most difficult times.

“Hope is happening!” “We’re getting there!” “Look at how far we’ve come in these past few years!” Nick was a man who had a vision for this place, who understood the importance of what we are here, who knew we had to maintain a building but that this

building is not Hope. To Nick, God's call for us to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with God is not just some unrealistic goal for the future but is the here and now of a place like Hope.

When I am devastated with a tragic loss like this, I often think of a piece of scripture from the Letter of James. "You do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.'" (James 4:14-15)

And I've mostly heard it as a fatalistic comment. If we are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes, what does it matter what we do or how we live? What does it matter if life is so frail and thin that it can simply be over in the blink of an eye?

That smacked me in the face again last Saturday morning. How can it be that my friend who was two nights before laughing and groaning and trying to outdo stories told by others was now no longer with us? Are we no more than a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes? Could that be all that we are in God's creation of us?

I looked again at this scripture from James, and I realized something more powerful. And I have come to realize that this is what Nick lived and tried to tell all of us in these last few years.

Here is what James writes before that the mist comment:

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ... [God] gives all the more grace; ... "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Submit yourselves therefore to God. Draw near to God, and [God] will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands ...

and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and [God] will exalt you. Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against [God] ... So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor? Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money." Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.

Nick learned the right thing to do. Nick learned the call of this world's riches was not God's call for him. Nick learned that our lives are not some fatalistic mist that simply disappears. Nick learned that the gift of his family was God's most precious gift to him. Nick learned that caring for others is God's call. Nick learned that God had placed a hand on his life and that God would be with him through anything.

Even through this, my friends, even through this God is with us. "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not let them be afraid." Those are Jesus' words. Those are words lived out in Nick's life in the few years that I've known him. "Do not be afraid... My peace I leave with you."

My first Father's Day here at Hope, I asked the kids during the Children's Message to give a man in their life a card which I handed out. These were cards that came along with my order of business cards – they had an angel on one side and on the other a

Psalm verse. The Stango kids took the one I gave them and handed it to their dad. I had no idea how much that meant to him and how it guided his decisions until several years later when Nick pulled this ragged card out of his wallet.

I have set the Lord always before me; because [God] is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. (Psalm 16:8)

I asked Colleen for this card the day after Nick died. It spoke to him for these few years. It speaks to me at this very moment. It speaks to us as we try to move forward.

I have set the Lord always before me; because [God] is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.

God has been before Nick his whole life. God is before Nick at this very moment. Nick is not afraid. Nick is in God's peace. We who now hurt beyond comprehension here and now need to follow that even in this life. "Do not be afraid." "Set God always before you." Be in God's peace now and always. Do not be shaken.

At the end of the Christmas Eve service, when I asked the congregation to look at those around them and see Christ in the eyes of their neighbors, Tim Dalton said it was clear how seriously Nick took that. "I know that I saw Christ in Nick," Tim wrote to me, "I hope he saw Christ in me."

I too saw Christ in Nick's eyes ... and in his life. May we all see Christ in each other as we remember the life of Nick Stango – born a child of God, lived as a child of God, still and forever a child of God.

Amen.