

## **Proper 27a 2020 LBI—November 8, 2020**

He was born John Frederick Martins on May 15, 1918. He was raised by his stepfather Albertus Powers and changed his name to Frederick John Powers. He married Dorothy at age 22, and 18 months later joined the Army Air Corp after Pearl Harbor, serving in a bomber squadron in the South Pacific until the war's end. He came home and they started a family of three children.

We attended the Episcopal Church in Brooklyn. I was confirmed in 1962 and continued attending services, even after my parents became more relaxed about "going to church."

My mother died in 1994. She always went to church when able. Dad, not so much. In 1995 he began showing up at St. Peter's in Spotswood and sat in the first pew, below the pulpit, and read the Bible while I preached. I thought he was following my sermon, but he was just reading until I finished preaching.

His religion was common for his generation: an official, casual connection to the church. He always wore a sport-coat and tie in church, even in summer. We didn't have air conditioning. I remember him kneeling next to me one hot summer day, the sweat rolling down his cheek. He said, "This better be worth a couple thousand years off of purgatory." He had a sense of humor.

The only grandparent I knew was his mother, and she didn't like kids. That seemed to shape him in ways that made him seem disinterested in our lives. But he endured a 33 year-long unhappy marriage so he could raise us and get us each out on our own. He did his duty.

On September 29, 1997, I got a call from Dad's oncologist. He asked if I could take Dad into our home. Fred's lung cancer had metastasized. He had weeks to live. We set him up in our bedroom and Nancy and I took up residence in our basement. A neighbor lent us her baby monitor so I could hear if he needed anything. His slightest whisper and I would jump out of bed to get him some water or change his soiled underwear.

I talked to him more in those two weeks than ever before. I told him how I have been at the bedside of a people who are passing from this life to the life to come, and that they would be seeing people I couldn't see. One lady said to her daughter, "O Gracie, I wish you could see it. It's so beautiful. Just one moment Joe." Then she told her daughter a couple more facts about her financial affairs, said "I love you," leaned back on her pillow and was gone. I said, "Dad, if your loved ones or angels appear to you, be sure to tell me." He said, "I will kid."

I was sound asleep in the early morning hours of my 48<sup>th</sup> birthday. Nancy was awakened by the sound of voices over the baby monitor. She heard my Dad speaking, and then she thinks she heard voices say, "We're ready for you now." She shook me awake and said, "Your Dad needs you." I jumped out of bed and went to his room. He was awake, but couldn't speak clearly. He fell back asleep, and I went downstairs.

In the morning, his breathing was labored. The hospice nurse suggested I gather nearby family. My brother and sister came over, and during the day Dad rallied and sat up. His wife Phyllis was at his bedside. He asked me to get him some ice cream. When I got back, he ate some, and then slowly seemed to go to sleep. As the afternoon wore on, he developed the "death rattle" breathing pattern. We gathered around him, and at

6:30pm Frederick John Powers died at age 79½. After prayers, I called our funeral director, who came and took him away to prepare him for his funeral.

Our children were sad to see Pop-Pop Fred go. They loved his sense of humor, to which they attributed his dying on my birthday. They insisted we eat my birthday cake. While we were doing that and sharing “Fred” stories, his wife Phyllis said, “Oh, by the way, when you were at the store buying ice cream, he said to tell you, “They came.” Phyllis thought he meant girls from work who brought him soup several times. Nancy and I knew the angels had come to him last night to lead him home to heaven.

Fred was not an outwardly religious man, but he had faith, which he made sure his kids learned. Those seeds of faith sprouted in different ways for my sister and me. The jury is out on my brother. But whatever small kernel of faith Fred Powers had, it was enough. It shaped how he lived his life. He wasn't outwardly showy, but he was faithful. His Lord welcomed him home.

Paul the Pharisee met Jesus while on the road to Damascus to arrest and bring Christians back to Jerusalem. He was changed in an instant. He went to Arabia where, over ten years, he was schooled in the new faith, called “the Way.” He gave his life to proclaiming the Lord Jesus Christ as the long-awaited Messiah and savior of the world. One day, a faithful believer named Barnabas sent for Paul to help him teach the Gospel to believers in Antioch in Syria, where Gentiles were also believing the Gospel. While they were there, the Holy Spirit directed the church to send them off on missionary journeys. After being freed from jail in Philippi, he came to Thessalonika. When the leaders of the synagogue threw him out, he left Timothy and Silas behind to comfort the few believers in that city. When Timothy joined him in Corinth, he brought a letter from

the small church with some questions about the faith. A major concern was about the fate of those who had died since Paul had left. What would happen to them when Jesus returned in glory, which they expected any day? Paul decided to send a written response to their questions. His first epistle to the Thessalonians is the earliest document of the Christian era, written 15 years after Jesus' resurrection and ascension.

He writes to address their grief and concern over the fate of those who died:

*<sup>13</sup>But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. <sup>14</sup>For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. <sup>15</sup>For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. <sup>16</sup>For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup>Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. <sup>18</sup>Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

Wow! Can you imagine the impact of those words on that small group of believers, gathered in a house church because they could no longer attend the synagogue?

*“Encourage one another with these words.”* Apparently, Paul was still expecting to be alive when Jesus returned. His words encouraged them to hold onto their faith, even as years went by and more and more people died. Eventually Paul accepted that he might also die before the Lord returned. Later writings in the New Testament show how that became the common belief, that the Lord's return may be delayed.

As the years wore on, some Christians began to wane in their faith. Some maintained their fervor, like the five bridesmaids who kept their lamps lit as they patiently waited for the bridegroom to arrive. By this parable, Jesus was showing that even he didn't know when he would return. Only the Father knows that timeline.

I often worried over that parable. Was my Dad like one of the foolish bridesmaids whose lamp had gone out? Would he be left behind if the Lord returned in his lifetime. That didn't happen. What Nancy heard over the baby monitor and Phyllis told me after he died comforts me with the belief that he kept the oil of faith alive in his lamp.

How is your lamp? Do you have enough oil of faith to keep your light shining? I realize that I can't tell by outward appearances alone whose lamp is burning brightly and whose has grown dim. You will have to take stock of your own faith.

My Dad was a passionate advocate for justice. He took his family to Washington in 1963 to march for equal rights and hear Martin Luther King Jr. speak. He taught himself Spanish so he could sell life insurance to poor people in the Bronx. His actions spoke the words of faith. He would have loved Amos, who said, <sup>23</sup>*Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.* <sup>24</sup>*But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

In three weeks, we begin another year of waiting for our Lord's return in the season of Advent. Before the year ends, we'll know officially who will be President and possibly who will be your Pastor in 2021. This has been a hard year. I haven't been able to meet many of you. But soon I'll be gone and another will be here. I trust you will greet him or her with joy, but more importantly, with your lamps of faith brightly burning. Because, who knows, Jesus just might come first.

