

Funeral – Barbara Thill Anderson
Zumbro Lutheran Church
July 5, 2011
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Jerry, Karl, Paul, Carmen, family and friends, grace and peace to you from the One who lived for us, who died for us, and who now claims victory over every grave, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Psalm 139 is a song that tells of our comings and our goings. It focuses on the marvelous handiwork of an artist who takes great delight in the creation. “O Lord, you have searched me and known me....It was you who formed me in my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made....In your book were written all the days that were formed for me.”

According to the psalmist, God is near and intimate. It’s an amazing thought and perhaps a little overwhelming. The Creator knows everything about the creation. There’s no escaping the reach of this God. Says the psalmist: “How weighty to me are your thoughts, O Lord! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.”

Barbara Anderson had a painting that tells of our comings and our goings. It’s the marvelous handiwork of an artist who took great delight in her creation. The picture is located in the Anderson living room. About six weeks ago, when I went to visit Barbara and Jerry, I was privileged to get a tour of the house. And, as a special bonus, I got to hear about the paintings in the artist’s own words. This particular painting is called, “River of the Sun.” It features a wooden boat. The sky and the water are a shimmering gold. There are red fish playfully jumping out of the water. There’s a trumpet in the boat, because, according to Barbara, a trumpet is a way to call for help when one’s problems become too great to handle alone. As we took a closer look at the painting, Barbara commented that she likes boats. They symbolize a journey. They remind us that *we don’t know where we’re coming from or where we’re going.*

Barbara’s words are fitting for any day, I think, but they seem especially poignant on a day like today. *We don’t know where we’re coming from or where we’re going.* Whether we’re 6 or 61, so much of life is outside of our control. So much is beyond our

knowing. About all we know for sure is that, when we come to the end of our days, we often wish we had more of them.

Barbara was born in St. Paul on March 4, 1950. She was fond of saying, “It’s the only day of the year that comes in the form of a command: *march forth*. Barbara was the daughter of Joe and Bernice Thill. She grew up on the north side of St. Paul. She went to Catholic parochial school. The nuns did their best to put the fear of God into her. Early on, Barbara displayed a knack for the arts. After high school, she enrolled in the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. Her specialty was the creative arts, and in particular, painting.

We don’t know where we’re coming from or where we’re going. In the fall of 1975, Barbara climbed into her green Chevy and drove to southern Minnesota. She was going to be an artist-in-residence in Austin. It was part of a pilot program sponsored by the state of Minnesota. Barbara set up a studio in the senior center. Both kids and adults came to the center to learn about art. Barbara also took her show on the road. She had a traveling studio set up in a refurbished mobile home. She went from one town to another—hotspots like Leroy and Lyle. Barbara became an evangelist of sorts for the gospel of art.

During her time in Austin, Barbara got introduced to young man named Gerald Anderson. Jerry was teaching at the Austin Community College. This was one of several interim jobs that Jerry was able to land. In his words, it was the “utility infielder” time of his profession. Barbara and Jerry quickly became good friends. They found out they had a lot in common. To top it off, she thought he was funny; and he thought she was funny. All I can say is, it must have been love.

During the summers, Barbara got introduced to a bright young girl named Carmen, who was Jerry’s daughter. Barbara planned the most wonderful birthday parties for her. Even though Carmen’s home was normally Iowa City, Barbara somehow managed to round up just enough friends to make it a celebration. The birthday cakes were always a hit, coming in the form of bunnies and cheeseburgers and teddy bears.

We don’t know where we’re coming from or where we’re going. On May 13, 1978, Barbara and Jerry got married at the Macalister College Chapel in St. Paul. For the next year or so, Jerry continued with his utility infielder work. Barbara spent time in the

art department at Macalister. By the summer of '79, Barbara was heavy with child. Things fell into place nicely. Jerry got an offer to teach at Luther College in Decorah. And it was full-time work. They would end up staying in Decorah for six years. Karl was born there. Jerry introduced Barbara to Lutheranism. Jerry and Barbara spent a year directing a study program for Luther College students in Nottingham, England. They had the time of their lives in Nottingham. They lived in an old Victorian house. They saw the sights of the country. To top it off, Paul was born a month before they came home.

We don't know where we're coming from or where we're going. In 1984 and '85 it felt like the sky was falling. Jerry's brother died and then his father died. His mom was suffering from dementia. Jerry was looking for a way to be closer to his mom who was still on the farm in northwest Minnesota. Things fell into place once again. Jerry was able to land a job teaching history at North Dakota State in Fargo. Barbara readily embraced the role of stay-at-home mom. There were children to raise, meals to fix, clothes to sew, Halloween costumes to create, vacations to plan, and, of course, a full range of art supplies to put to good use.

During those years, Barbara worked on a master's degree at Moorhead State. Not long after she was done, Concordia College came calling. Barbara filled in for a professor for a couple of months, and when the professor didn't return, Barbara was offered the job. While at Concordia she was both teacher and gallery director. She ended up working at the college for 17 years.

Barbara and Jerry used to joke that when they retired, they wanted to move south. When you live in Fargo-Moorhead, I guess, Rochester is about as far south as you need to go to have a good time. They found a cozy little home, with a perfect room for an art studio. They joined Zumbro Lutheran Church. Jerry wrote novels. Barbara continued to paint.

Barbara seemed to have a special place in her heart for disasters. She painted a stunning picture of the I-35 bridge collapse in Minneapolis. She painted scenes of the Beatitudes, including one of a little boat coming to aid the victims of a plane crash. Barbara said she wasn't exactly sure why she took an interest in disasters. She mused, "Maybe these paintings provide an opportunity for redemption." Whatever the reason, I

think these disaster scenes tell us something about the size of Barbara's heart and the depth of her compassion.

We don't know where we're coming from or where we're going. Last fall Barbara and Jerry received the jarring news that she had pancreatic cancer. The prognosis wasn't good. Still, Barbara fought bravely. She wanted all the time she could get. She wanted to be with Jerry. She wanted to be with her children. She wanted to travel. She wanted to help the new Worship Arts Team at Zumbro get off the ground. She wanted to paint. She wanted to keep doing what she'd always done: embracing life with passion and creativity and love.

Sadly Barbara lost her fight with cancer early Thursday morning. She died at home, at peace, surrounded by people who loved her. In the corner of the room, just above her bed, was a painting on "Dorothy" from the Wizard of Oz. It was part of a series based on the characters in the story. Barbara said she wasn't intending to include Dorothy. In her words, "Dorothy was kind of a wimpy character." But somewhere along the way, she changed her mind. And Dorothy got a picture too. In the painting there's a high hill. Little circles are floating in the air just above the hill. "They symbolize hope," said Barbara. "One of the circles is still on the hill. It's waiting to be released and join the others." As Barbara described her work, I couldn't help but feel a little stab of pain. And I wondered: Was she talking about Dorothy? Or was she talking about herself? Had the hill gotten too high for her? Was she the one waiting for release?

We don't know where we're coming from or where we're going. As we start out on the journey in our little boat, we don't know we'll be born in St. Paul, Minnesota; we don't know we'll be going to Catholic parochial school; we don't know we'll exhibit a particular passion for art, or marry a guy named Jerry that we meet in Austin, or end up being a mom to three delightful children, or teach art at Concordia College, or retire in Rochester, or have one's life cut tragically short at the age of 61.

We don't know any of these things. But here's the truth: God does. God can see our comings and our goings. God knows everything about us. That's what the psalmist says. "If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast."

Of course, as with all journeys, sometimes the way becomes impossibly hard. The psalmist cries out: “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night.” Still, in the middle of the night, the psalmist finds hope: “Even the darkness is not dark to you, [O Lord]; the night is as bright as the day.”

Today it feels as if we are in that darkness. We have lost a special creation of God named Barbara. We have lost a creative mind, a compassionate heart, a vibrant spirit. It’s hard to say goodbye. Our hearts are heavy. Still, in the middle of the night, we look for hope: “Because of what you have done for us in Jesus, O Lord, even the darkness is not dark to you. To you the night is as bright as the day.”

Here’s what I’m thinking: on this very sad day, if we listen closely enough, we might be able to hear the sound of a trumpet. The trumpet sounded when Barbara’s problems became too great for her to handle alone. And now it has sounded again, with an unmistakable note of redemption. A little boat has drifted down the river and out onto the horizon. It’s just beyond where we can see. The sky has turned a shimmering gold. And the night has become day.

Soli deo gloria. To God alone be the glory.