

Homily for the Celebration of Life of Joseph Alexander Ziemba
May 9, 2025, St. Luke/San Lucas Episcopal Church
Psalm 23; Lamentations 3:22-26;31-33; John 10: 11-16

“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
God’s mercies never come to an end;
They are new every morning;
Great is your faithfulness.”
Amen

Please be seated.

We didn’t do much to prepare for this service, because Joseph already had it planned. The music. The readings. The prayers.

Those of us privileged to spend time with Joseph, to get to know him, are not surprised. He knew his way around the Prayer Book, and had very definite opinions on what he liked—and what he didn’t. This service, in all its aspects, is very much a reflection of Joseph, and I hope that, as we move through the different parts of the liturgy, as we read and pray and reflect, you will be able to see Joseph, to remember those moments you shared with him during his time here on earth and in this place, that you will once again hear his voice and feel the love he had for all of us gathered here.

I’m going to start with the music, because that is one of my first memories of Joseph. During my early days here at St. Luke’s, I was still completing my Clinical Pastoral Education program at PeaceHealth Medical Center, serving as a hospital chaplain. One Sunday at coffee hour, after a particularly long stint at the hospital, I was sharing with the group that one of the patients had asked me to sing the hymn, “How Great Thou Art,” for them. I had told them that, while I did know the words, I’m not a soloist and that’s not a very easy tune to sing, by yourself, without music, in a hospital room. Still, the patient insisted that they wanted to have that hymn as one of the last things they heard on earth. So I gave it a try. When I finished, the patient paused and they thanked me and said, you mean well, but you are no Shaina Twain. Very true, I am definitely not Shaina Twain.

After that, Joseph would regularly refer to me as Shaina, as we shared our love of the old traditional hymns. And I imagine that, as we do our best to sing these wonderful pieces, the Navy hymn, Amazing Grace, as we raise our voices together in song, Joseph is probably listening, and muttering to himself, they mean well, but they are definitely not Shaina.

The readings are also very much Joseph. He chose two of the traditional pieces—Psalm 23 and John 10. The Good Shepherd texts. Almost as if he knew we would be celebrating his

life in the week of Good Shepherd Sunday. He will have the whole of the Episcopal Church reflecting on his chosen theme—and I'm sure he knows it.

But not all of his selections are traditional. Joseph also included a special poem, which Stephen will read for us in a moment. And, in something that spoke to me, he asked us to use the Lamentations passage as a second reading. This text is among the less common ones for celebrations of life nowadays, yet it contains some deeply meaningful words. "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases...they are new every morning."

Anyone who had the privilege of listening to Joseph speak about his late wife, Elizabeth, is aware that Joseph knows a love that is steadfast, unending, new every morning. I did not have the opportunity to meet Elizabeth, I only knew her through Joseph. Yet I did know her, because whenever Joseph would speak of Elizabeth—and he did it often—his whole face would light up. He spoke of her with joy. He spoke of her with humor. He spoke of her with admiration, proudly sharing her accomplishments with listeners. And always, always, always, he spoke of her with love.

As we join together here, as we remember Joseph, as we celebrate his life and sing his chosen songs, we may be wiping away a few tears, and that's okay. Those are outward and visible signs of the love we have for Joseph, and the grief we feel, knowing that he won't be with us at coffee hour or singing beside us as we belt out Amazing Grace. Joseph will understand our grief and our sense of loss, because he himself grieved those he lost, those who have gone on before.

But we can also remember that Joseph did not spend his life in darkness. He spoke often and with sincerity, of his love for God, his love for community, and his love for family. He continued to be generous with those around him. To share with others his appreciation for beauty, for roses and mahjong, for Touchdown Jesus and good whiskey, for the Navy and the church. Joseph's deep understanding of history, historical places and events, were not an effort to live in the past, but rather an appreciation that, by learning the lessons of the past, we can make the future better, brighter, more loving.

I will miss Joseph, our shared memories of time spent in Alexandria, his humor and his wisdom. There is an empty seat at our communal table, a hole in our coffee club, where Joseph once sat. Yet at the same time, we are here for a celebration, a joyous remembrance of the life of a man who knew the steadfast love of God, who sought out wisdom and knowledge and beauty, and shared them with those of us gathered here today.

And we, too, can celebrate, assured that Joseph is reunited with his beloved Elizabeth, and that, together, they are watching as each new morning breaks.

Amen.