

*You Are Going to Die*

“No one gets out of life alive.” Variations of that quotation have been attributed to various people. Of course, that quote, though somewhat crude, is absolutely true. Unless Christ comes back to earth in our lifetime, we will all someday die. That’s a fact you probably did not want to hear in church today. We don’t like to be reminded of our mortality. We all live in a state of denial about death. We know intellectually that we are going die someday, but we cannot really imagine simply not existing. Our personal demise doesn’t seem quite real to us, although it is. So we try not to think about it too much.

Death is on my mind a lot. As a pastor, I preside at about a dozen funerals a year. One year I officiated at 26 funerals; that was an average of one every two weeks. I also work with people who are frequently seriously ill. I don’t know how much the average person thinks about death. Before I was ordained it may have sometimes been years between the deaths of people close to me, so I didn’t have to think of death once a month or more. Is that true for you? Of course, at a certain age we find many of our friends starting to pass away; and the illnesses of ourselves, or those we love, always carry with them a reminder that death is a possibility.

Our goal is not to scare or depress you this morning. It’s just that death is something that needs to be talked about, and Lent is as good a time as any. I find people all the time who have not given adequate thought to death in a Christian context and people who have no Biblical foundation on which to begin to consider the reality of the end of life and the afterlife. If we aren’t going to hear and learn about death and what follows it from a scriptural perspective here in church, where will we hear and learn about it? The subject of death is as inescapable in the Bible as it is in our lives.

Consider for instance, that death is found throughout the Bible readings assigned for today. In the reading from Genesis, Abram's fear is that he is going to die without a proper heir. Then in the ritual God prescribes to seal his covenant with Abram, that He will provide him with an heir before he dies, Abram has to sacrifice, that is kill, several animals. In the Psalm, David prays that the Lord will protect him from his foes, that is, that his enemies will not kill him. In both these readings we have a typical Old Testament perspective on death, that is, an emphasis on life in this world, with the idea of surviving on beyond death through one's children or one's achievements, with little thought to a life after death. The afterlife seems to have not been a big concern to the people of the Old Testament.

The New Testament has a very different perspective on death and life afterwards. Our epistle reading was from Philippians. Paul writes there about the enemies of Christ whose end is destruction, as compared to Christians who are citizens of an eternal Heaven. In Heaven, Paul says, our mortal bodies will be transformed to be like Jesus' resurrected body, the body Jesus has since he rose from the dead. Finally, in the gospel, Jesus is warned that Herod is trying to kill him. Herod does not intimidate Jesus though. But Jesus does lament that Jerusalem has a history of killing the prophets God sent to it. Jesus' statement foreshadows his own death on the cross, the necessary pre-condition for his Resurrection. Jesus death and resurrection are, of course, the overarching themes of Lent and of Christianity itself.

So, taken as a whole, what specifically does the Bible teach us about death? What witness does Holy Scripture make about the end of our earthly lives and what lies beyond? It is often said that death is natural, but that is not what the Bible says. God created us not to die. God created us to live and enjoy life with Him forever. Death only came into the world through the sin of our first parents. Death is a consequence of sin; Paul calls death "the wages of sin." In that sense death is an enemy, our greatest enemy, an enemy we cannot conquer on our own.

Jesus did for us what we could not do for ourselves. He willingly suffered death for our salvation. He took all of our sins upon himself and paid the penalty for our transgressions. One of the great mysteries of our faith is that by his death on the cross Jesus has conquered death. There are various ways that Jesus' atoning death has been understood. We can see it as Jesus taking our punishment for us, or the ultimate expression of obedient love, or a kind of trap God set for the Devil. We are looking these ideas in a course called "Why Did Jesus Have to Die?" in our Tuesday morning Bible Study. But however we understand it, the point is that Jesus' death frees us from the power of death and creates the possibility that we will be resurrected, raised again to life, as he was. Jesus death and Resurrection has transformed death itself.

For the Christian believer, death then becomes God's means of calling us home. Our bodies die only once. In Christianity there is no reincarnation, no transmigration of souls, no cycle of dying and rebirth. Death is the end of our earthly pilgrimage. In death our soul and body are separated for a time. Yet, there is no reason for Christians to fear death. We who believe and have been baptized into Jesus, who have already been killed and raised with Christ sacramentally and united to him in faith... we are assured of a new life beyond the grave and the gate of death.

For us, death is not so much the end of life as it is merely entering a new mode of life. Confident in God's grace and the forgiveness of our sins, we can embrace our death as something positive. We can make even our physical demise a witness to our faith in Christ because we know we are going to be with our Savior. The logical, faithful thing for us to do is to be prepared for our death. In our death denying culture even the church has frequently forgotten how to help people prepare to die. Eternity is a long time, so it makes sense to use our little time on this earth here as a time to prepare for what comes after this world, especially since the Biblical witness is that there is judgment at death.

What happens to your soul, your spirit, when you die? Where does it go? And what about your body? Is it just an empty shell, or is it something more? The witness of the Bible, and the teaching of the church throughout the ages, is at the moment of death, the souls of the faithful, our spiritual essence, go to be with God and our bodies decay. On the last day, the day of Christ's return, there is a final Judgment, and we who are in Christ will have our bodies raised incorruptible, like Jesus' resurrected body, and our new bodies and souls will be reunited. That is the future of God's people: a bodily existence, greater than anything we have ever known, in eternity with God in heaven, praising him forever.

There is much about the afterlife that we cannot know now. God shares with us what need to know. He shares with us as much as our mortal minds can handle. But in answer to some frequently asked questions, yes, there we will recognize and know one another in heaven. We will be reunited with those we love. But most importantly, we will see Christ face-to-face and know the joy and glory of his unmediated love. It will be beyond anything we have ever experienced here on earth.

To be complete and totally honest, we have to acknowledge that all people will be raised and judged according to their deeds. We are all sinners, but those of us who are in Christ will be pardoned and saved for Christ' sake. But what about those who are not in Christ? What about those who knowingly, persistently reject God's grace? We have to accept the possibility that there are those who will be eternally separated from God. However we might envision Hell, eternal separation from God has to be the worst part. We worship a God who is gracious and merciful, but we cannot presume on His mercy. That is why it is so necessary for us to tell the world about Jesus Christ's and his wondrous love, the love that is saving us, saving our bodies and souls from sin, death, and the devil. Christ can save them too. Amen.