

*An Afterlife Primer*

The past several weeks we have been preaching on the second lesson, the epistle reading, and we will continue that trend today. What Paul had to say in the opening of his letter to the church in Colosseae is apropos to our situation today, especially as we prepare to baptize Olivia Frances a little later in the service. Even a quick look at this passage reveals several references to our hope for a life in Christ beyond this world.

Paul writes to the Colossians about the “hope laid up for you in heaven.” He says that God “the Father has enabled [them] to share in the inheritance of all the saints in light.” And he says that we have been “transferred... into the glorious kingdom of his beloved Son.” This is particularly relevant to us because one of the things we believe about Baptism is that it promises us eternal life in Heaven with God.

Of course, believing that we will be in Heaven with God after this life is through presupposes a belief in God. Not everyone believes in God today. In fact, atheism has become quite fashionable these days. Recently there have been several best selling books attacking theism. Militant atheists have been asserting their arguments and evangelizing for their cause (all puns intended). To mix a metaphor, poking wholes in the atheists’ arguments is like shooting fish in a barrel.

For instance, atheists will often say that science, especially the theory of evolution, disproves the existence of God. The universe, they say, came into being, and human beings evolved, without an intelligent creator. I think G.K. Chesterton said it best decades ago when he quipped, “An evolutionist is a man who thinks he’s an accident, and I tend to agree with him.” There is much that could be said to refute such atheistic arguments, but that is not the thrust of our message today.

So let one riposte suffice then: If you were walking along the beach and found a watch, would you assume that somehow all the elements necessary to form that complex machinery came together by accident to make that watch, or would you assume an intelligent watchmaker assembled it? Given the infinite complexity we find in the cosmos, the earth, and human life, do you think it all just accidentally happened, or that some higher intelligence with great power beyond our understanding put it all together for a purpose? There are many even more persuasive arguments for the existence of God, but that one alone is enough to cast more than the shadow of a reasonable doubt over the atheist's case.

Given that God exists, and that He is the Creator of all life, the jump to a belief in life after death is logical, natural, and warranted. If God can create human beings from the dust of the ground, and the universe from nothing at all, then bringing the dead to life is no impossible feat for Him. The crux of our Christian faith is that Jesus, the Son of God, was himself raised from the dead. It has been said that if God did not raise Jesus from the dead, He would be a gross underachiever. But in fact, Jesus was resurrected, the first fruits of the dead, and Paul himself talked to eyewitnesses of the Resurrection. Jesus not only appeared to his disciples and his other close associates, but also to more 500 believers at one time, and to Paul himself. The veracity of Christ's resurrection is as reliable as a historical fact can be.

Our Christian faith tells us that the benefits of Christ's resurrection are transferred to us in Holy Baptism. And, as we've said, one of those benefits is the promise of eternal life. As I talk to people, both people inside and outside the Christian faith, I find that there is much confusion about life after death. I think this confusion exists for two reasons. One, the church has been reticent in recent decades about teaching the basics of Christian doctrine. The church as a whole simply has not addressed these topics or it has said that the biblical/theological witness about them is unclear. And two, popular culture has stepped

in to fill this doctrinal void with pseudo-science and superstition. We hear more about life after death from pop culture than we do from the church. No wonder people are confused.

There is much we simply will not understand about heaven until we get there. But there are also things that we can know for sure right here right now. But first, let's consider where that knowledge comes from: It does not come from human experience. I have an interest in "near death experiences" and I've talked to many people who have had them. Their experiences are fascinating, and almost always faith affirming. However, our beliefs cannot ultimately be based on such phenomena. Could these experiences be the psychological artifact of physical shock? Can't the devil himself masquerade as an angel of light to deceive us? Our faith is based on the biblical witness, and the Bible has more to say about life after death than we might have been led to believe.

On one hand, human beings are not immortal by nature. We are made from dust and our bodies return to dust. On the other hand, scripture tells us that all people will be resurrected. This return to life is through no power of our own, it is only due to the will and activity of God. Only God can bring the dead to life. Furthermore, scripture tells us that we human beings are composed of both a body and a spirit, which are woven together. Recall from Genesis how God breathed the breath of life, which is spirit, into the first man's nostrils. At death our bodies are separated from our spirits for a time.

What happens immediately after death is one of the most vexing questions people face. Do we sleep in the grave until Resurrection Day or are we immediately with God? I confess that I have not always been clear on that point myself until recently and I fear that not having a clear answer may injure some people's faith. Well, there is a clear biblical answer. Simply put, when we die our bodies rest in the grave until Judgment Day and the spirits of the saved go immediately to God while the spirits of those who have rejected

God's grace go to their place apart from God. That is the teaching we find over and over again in the New Testament.

That means that when you die you will be in God's presence right away and at some later point, at the general resurrection, you will be reunited with your body in heaven. However, it will be a new, glorious resurrection body, similar to but much greater than the bodies we have here on earth. And the fact that our bodies here on earth may have been destroyed or decomposed has no bearing on our resurrection bodies. The God who created Heaven and earth can create a new body for us without any problems.

You may have noticed that we said not everyone is resurrected to the joys of heaven. All people face judgment for their deeds and we all will all be found wanting. Those of us in Christ, though, will be pardoned for the sake of his blood. We are not Universalists. We recognize the possibility, that in God's justice, all might not be saved. But no one is predestined to eternal separation from God. In fact, God sentences no one to perdition. But people may choose it for themselves. God doesn't drag anyone in to heaven screaming and kicking. He respects our human freedom too much for that. But love, even loving God, cannot be forced. We believe and teach that we are justified by grace through faith. What do faith and grace have to do then with baptism, that promises eternal life?

To explain that, let me use of a Latin term that you can use to impress all your friends: *ex opera operato*. It means "from the work itself." Lutherans do not look at the sacraments, including Baptism, as working *ex opera operato*. We certainly believe in the power of Holy Baptism to save. It is God's holy Word inextricably combined with the element of water. But if Baptism alone saves, why we don't we just drive the down the street in a fire truck and baptize everybody we see with a fire hose so that all may be saved from eternal fire? It is because we also believe that faith is involved in the efficacy of the sacrament.

Here comes our obligatory Lutheran paradox: Faith doesn't make the sacrament powerful, but faith receives the power of the sacrament. Scripture tells us the one who believes and is baptized will be saved. You cannot earn the gift of salvation, you cannot even choose to receive it, but you can chose to reject it, although I cannot imagine why anyone ever would. The children we baptize, such as Olivia Frances today, repose safely in Jesus' care. And we have no doubts that she will grow up in to the faith confessed on her behalf today. It's not as if she has a temporary fire insurance policy that is in effect only until she reaches the age of accountability and then she'll have to choose for herself to be a Christian or not. She won't ever need to make a conscious decision to follow Christ, if I know her parents and godparents, because she will grow up just always knowing that Jesus loves her, and she will love Jesus. Living in the love of Christ, family, and the church will be natural for her. It will be grace. It will be her salvation.

That's our desire for all people, that they might know and love Christ, and live in his love both in this life and eternally. So we preach, and we teach, and we baptize. Even more, we trust in Christ, to be faithful to his promises us, to strengthen us for mission and ministry, and to raise up his people, his church, to eternal life. Meanwhile, we live out our baptism by working and serving in his name. Grant that, O Lord, to us all. Amen.