

“What’s Next?” Death and Afterlife a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey
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THIS PAST WEDNESDAY we entered Lent with the blessing: “ashes to ashes dust to dust, remember your death.” Now you may not *think* it a blessing to have a glob of ashes ground into your forehead with the reminder that you will die! But the completion of the Ash Wednesday blessing is “Remember your death that you may live!”

This week and next week we are going to consider death. I must concede that the actual questions I received focused more on what happens after death. What is heaven? Will we actually be reunited with those we loved on earth? Is there individual consciousness?

We will consider these – next week! But, there are several questions which must come first. These were not asked specifically for this sermon series, but I have heard them in my office over and over. What is death, and what if there is nothing after death? What if this is all there is?

The first part is simple. When a human being dies, the physical body that supports us disintegrates, and the soul separates from the body. Every death means that a unique “I” vanishes from the earth; there can never again be that precise individual who has touched and been touched by a whole little world, in ways that will never ever happen again. As Preacher Walter Burghart says: “I am not someone, I am *this* one. When I die, this warm, pulsating flame of human living and loving will die with me; and all my relationships as experienced in this human life will be broken.” (*Living Pulpit*, vol 7. no. 3, 1998)

For a Christian, death is certainly a final cessation of our physical life. But Burghart continues: “Death is the unique point between time and timelessness when the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of Life, can take permanent possession of my spirit without my earthbound resistance and there will be wholeness.” If we are people of the light, people of hope, death is the ultimate union with the Light, the ultimate enlightenment, the ultimate hope. The essential and defining belief of our faith is that the world was created by an all-knowing and benevolent God, and unless there is a world to come, that belief simply makes no sense. Death on this plane is the beginning of life on another. Russian novelist Vladimir Nabokov said it this way: “Life is a great surprise. I do not see why death should not be an even greater one.” (*Pale Fire*)

You see, we Christians have a promise that death is far more than simple resignation. It is an act of trust, even choice, where we accept in love the mystery that is God, where we surrender our spirit and soul unconditionally in the way of Jesus, who, “bowed his head, and handed over his spirit.” (John 19:30)

“What if there is nothing after death?” For us, it is the wrong question. Do you remember, in Matthew 22, when the Sadducees challenged Jesus with a trick question about the afterlife? The Sadducees were members of a Jewish sect founded in the second century BC, possibly as a political party. They created new interpretations of the Torah based on a literal understanding of verses, rejecting any oral tradition. Because they

accepted only the first five books of the Bible-the Books of Moses-as scripture, they saw no teachings there about any afterlife.

But what they did find was a law that said: If a man dies without a son, his brother is to marry his wife and have a son with her. This son will be considered the heir of the dead brother, thus assuring that the dead man's lineage and name would continue.

(Deuteronomy 25:5-10) Now the Sadducees said, "If there's life after death, why would God have given Moses such a law? It's not needed if a person lives on anyway. But, in fact, a person does not live on and that's the reason for this law. In their view, We live on only through our children.

The Pharisees on the other hand, believed in afterlife. They believed that the next life would be very much like this one except on a much higher, grander scale. They believed that persons would be married and that life would be such that a man's wife could give birth everyday! Let's ask the women whether this is their idea of paradise!

When the Sadducees debated the Pharisees about an afterlife, they often used a question to try to show how absurd such a belief was. It's the same question they ask Jesus. "Suppose," they said, "that a man dies without a son. His brother marries his wife, as the law requires, but he dies too. The next brother marries her but he dies, and so on until seven brothers have married her. Whose wife will she be in the resurrection? To whom will she belong?"

This question confused the Pharisees. They didn't have a good answer for it, for they believed you would stay married but just whose wife such a woman would be was difficult for them to answer.

Jesus took this question seriously, even though he knew it was asked by persons who were trying to get him to say something for which they could condemn him. He begins his answer by saying that such a question shows a great lack of understanding of the resurrection. "In this life," he says, "persons marry and are given in marriage, but in the next life they neither marry nor are given in marriage. In fact, they cannot die for they will be like angels and they will be in the children of God."

Jesus is saying that we cannot compare this life to that one. There are no images adequate for it. It's like Paul says, "Eye hath not seen nor ear heard nor has it entered into the mind of man the things that God has prepared for them who love God." (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Jesus is saying that in the life to come, our relationships will far transcend even that of marriage, for we will have an intimacy, a closeness to God and one another for which there were no images to describe, no analogy we can find in this life to illustrate it.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He knows that more than anything the Sadducees admire Moses and his teachings. So, Jesus quotes Exodus 3:6 to them. "You are wrong," Jesus says, "in believing there are no teachings from Moses about the resurrection. Does not

God say to Moses at the burning bush, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob'? God is not the God of the dead, but the living; for in God, all of them are alive."

In the Gospel of John (13:35-14:36) Simon Peter asks, 'Lord, where are you going?' Jesus answered, 'Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterwards.'. 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. He continues: ²In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going."

The Apostle Paul elaborated on this truth. In his second letter to Corinth he wrote: " So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." (2 Corinthians 4.11-5.3)

"Whose wife is this woman? To whom does she belong?" the Sadducees asked. "Why, she's God's" Jesus said. "She's a child of God with a room waiting for her in the Father's house." So am I. And so are you.

I think there is one more thing that needs to be said today. It is "So what?" If we accept both the inevitability of death and the truth of afterlife, how does that make a difference? Well, if we can give up our fear and denial of death, if we accept the fragility of life, perhaps we can claim the sacred nature of life, the gift of life that must never be taken for granted.

"Teach me O God the shortness of life, that I might gain wisdom of the heart." This prayer from Psalm 90. It reminds us of the brevity of that hyphen between the dates of our birth and death. It underscores that it is not how long we live, but how well, how fully, we live that hyphen. Writer R. Tagore put it this way: "Death's stamp gives value to the coin of life, making it possible to buy with life what is truly precious." (*Stray Birds*)

And what is it that keeps us from living fully, embracing and tending to each day? Too often it is fear. As writer Ted Loder put it, "fear has spooked me into a hundred hiding places, pretended gaiety being one of them. " Fear of what others think of us, fear of failure fear of not being in control, fear of the new and different. Besides fear, perhaps we are still burdened by baggage from the past, hurts, betrayals, disappointment, But in light of the end of the hyphen, we ask, what really matters now, in this day this moment.

Here is a quote from a letter that Lucy, 50-year-old woman just months away from death, wrote to her friend Sister Joan Delapane: “To die is to gain – to be fully alive in God’s unfathomably loving presence. But I believe I am not right now being called to die but to live this earthly life as abundantly as I am able – loving those I have been given to love, teaching, and learning from co-learners in the classroom, and glorifying God sometimes with my doing but more often with my being.” When good health and energy are ours, there can be a tendency to lose perspective about life and things that really matter. And when we are struggling or suffering or grieving, we can lose perspective about the strength of life, the hope and possibility of life.

But when we remember our death, we remember the words of John Henry Newman: Fear not that your life will come to an end but rather that it will never have a beginning.

I do believe that death is not ultimate, but God is ultimate. And death is, ultimately, an ineffable mystery. It requires our faith, our surrender to that mystery. And Rainer Rilke’s quote, which is our Lenten theme, speaks well to the mystery: “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions. . . Live your questions now and you will live along some distant day into your answers.”

May it be so.

Amen