

RAISED FROM DEATH TO LIFE

a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, June 18, 2017

Based on John 10:27-28; I Cor. 15:20-22,49-57

The sermon this morning is the second in a summer sermon series entitled, "The Hope of Heaven." Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

There was once a man who lived in Seattle, who, in the midst of winter, was departing for a vacation in Miami Beach. The man's wife was on a business trip in Minneapolis; she was planning to fly directly from Minneapolis to Miami and to arrive two days after her husband.

The husband, in Seattle, went to the airport, looking forward to nice weather in Florida, but unfortunately there was a mix-up at the gate, and he was told he could not get on the plane, but would have to wait for a late, red-eye flight. He appealed to the supervisor but with no success. Finally, he got on the late plane and arrived the next day in Miami, where he discovered that Miami was having a heat wave, and the weather was almost as uncomfortably hot as Seattle was cold. After checking in at his hotel, he rushed to head out to the pool; but before leaving his room, he dashed off an e-mail to his wife, who was to arrive the next day. In his haste, however, he sent the e-mail to the wrong address. His message arrived at the home of an elderly preacher's wife whose even older husband had died just the day before. When the grieving widow opened her e-mail, she took one look at the monitor, let out an anguished scream, and then passed out on the floor. Her family rushed into her room, where they saw this message on the screen:

"Dearest wife, Departed yesterday as you know. Just got checked in. Some confusion at the gate. Appeal was denied. Received confirmation of your arrival tomorrow. Your loving husband. P.S. Things are not as we thought. You're going to be surprised at how hot it is down here."

When it comes to concepts about the afterlife, there is a lot of confusion in people's minds, and many people are inclined to grab on to mistaken ideas. Today there are two major ideas that people often have about the afterlife, both of which are rejected by the Bible.

Certainly one of the dominant ideas in our time about the afterlife is that death is simply annihilation; that is to say, there is no afterlife. When you die, you are just finished. Actually, as we noted last week, this is the perspective of the early Biblical writings; the Bible starts from the conviction that we are mortal beings whose natural end is death. Today's atheists and materialists might be surprised to discover that their view of death is exactly what is affirmed in the first half of the Bible, namely, that our short life on earth ends, and the only thing that we can reasonably expect will continue is the memories others have of us and any impact we may have made in the world.

Of course, the huge difference between the Bible on the one hand and atheists and materialists on the other is that the Bible recognizes the reality of God. We are indeed mortal beings, in the Biblical view; but we are mortal beings *who have been created by God*—a God who cares about us and a God who acts. The story of the Bible is the story of how God

acts for our salvation, acting ultimately through Jesus Christ, to create for us a new and eternal future. As Paul said in the passage we heard, “In Christ shall all be made alive.” (I Cor. 15:22)

Thus the Bible begins with a very restrained, no-nonsense assessment of our human condition. There is no assumption that we might somehow be immortal. The Bible is quite clear that our destiny is death. The only way that there could be life beyond death would be if God, in some extraordinary fashion, opened the way for us. This is precisely what God does through Jesus Christ, as God acts, through the cross and resurrection, to create for us an everlasting destiny. Because of Christ, our future is not annihilation but eternal life. As Jesus said, concerning those who have faith in him, “I give them eternal life.” (John 10:28)

This brings us to the other very common idea that many people have today about life after death. There is a widespread notion that human beings have an immortal soul, a core spiritual aspect of ourselves that is inherently eternal. In this view, your body may pass away, but the essential “you” is an eternal spirit which will naturally continue to exist. Among those who believe in an immortal soul, there are several major ideas about what exactly will happen to the soul after the physical death of the body.

One ancient idea is that the spirit continues as some sort of “ghost”—the spirit floats around on earth and may continue to interact with earthly events. Various forms of pagan ancestor worship held to this idea, and the idea of ghosts has had periodic popularity in American culture. Ghosts especially pop up in movies,

Another ancient idea is that the spirit becomes reincarnated, either in another human being or in an animal. Hindus believe that your immortal soul returns repeatedly to earth in one reincarnation after another, and the idea of reincarnation has gained some popularity in recent years in America. People like to speculate about coming back into another life, and imagine what sort of fascinating lives they may have had in the past. Interestingly enough, Hindus, who have pondered the idea of reincarnation for many centuries, have come to a much more sobering idea about reincarnation. They realize that those past lives were probably not so hot, and future lives may not be so great either. In the Hindu view, reincarnation is actually not a good thing—it means you are not getting anywhere—the goal of Hinduism is not to be reincarnated over and over but to be released from the cycle of rebirths in order to enter an eternal spiritual state of bliss that the Hindus call moksha and the Buddhists call nirvana.

This brings us to a third major concept concerning the destiny of the immortal soul—the idea that the soul, after the death of the body, will enter (hopefully) into some good eternal realm. Many ancient Greeks and Romans, for example, believed that when good people die their bodies pass away but their soul moves on to Elysium, the Elysian Fields, a realm of endless paradise.

One thing quite notable in all this is that there is a well-nigh universal “sense of immortality” that appears across human cultures and times. In Norway, for example, excavations of Viking burial mounds have turned up elaborate artifacts such as carts and even whole ships that were meant to accompany the deceased into some immortal realm, and we find this sort of thing in extremely diverse cultures all across the globe. People everywhere, even in completely disconnected cultures, have believed in life beyond death. Why is this so? It seems as though God has implanted in the human mind an idea that we are intended for an immortal destiny. Indeed the Bible affirms this fact; as it is said in Ecclesiastes, “God has set eternity in the human heart.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

From the Biblical perspective, what we are seeing across human cultures is an intimation that God has given to all human beings that God will open up for us an eternal destiny. God has given everyone a foretaste of heaven. The mistake that people have often made is to assume, from that “sense of eternity,” that there is something naturally immortal about us. This is the idea of the “immortal soul”—that we will somehow automatically continue on into eternity. But if that is the case, then you scarcely have any need for God when it comes to eternal life; your soul is going to continue on no matter what. Interestingly enough, this is the precisely the scenario that has commonly come forth in many movies about heaven in recent decades. “Heaven Can Wait” or “What Dreams May Come,” for example, featured journeys into heaven in which God was nowhere to be found.

But the Bible is very plain that we will have no immortality without God. We can speak of the soul—in the Bible when you see the word “soul” it generally translates the Hebrew word “nephesh” or the Greek word “psyche”—it refers to our core spiritual identity. God has created us as individual persons who have a spiritual nature. But what is also quite clear is that there is nothing about us that is inherently or automatically immortal. This is why the Bible finally speaks not about the immortal soul but about resurrection.

The Bible has a view of human beings that is actually quite consistent with modern science. In the Biblical understanding, we are finite creatures, made, as Genesis says, out of the dust of the earth. We are not spirit beings who just happen to be encased in a body, so that when the body dies, the spirit will naturally float off. Rather, in keeping with the understanding of modern science, we are unitary beings in which our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual qualities are all intertwined. So when the body dies, the whole business dies; or as Paul expressed it in that passage we heard from I Corinthians, we have a “perishable nature.” (*we shall all be changed . . . this perishable nature must put on the imperishable. I Cor. 15:51,53*) In order for us to have eternal life, we must, as Paul says, “be changed”—“our perishable nature must put on the imperishable.” And this can only happen through the gracious action of God.

This is why, in the Apostle’s Creed, we do not say that we believe in the immortality of

the soul. We say that “we believe in the resurrection of the body.” When people believe in the immortality of the soul, they think that they are naturally immortal, and so they can tend to take eternal life for granted. They know they will die, but they think that their soul will of course carry on. They are like people on a ship that is sinking, who although they know the ship is sinking, and they are air-breathing creatures, imagine that somehow in reality they are fish; and when the ship sinks, they will just keep happily swimming on in a new realm. When we have a Biblical perspective, we recognize our true situation. When the ship sinks—when our life ends—we are going down to our doom into the deep, unless there is One who can pull us out.

This is what God does through Jesus Christ. On the cross, Jesus dives into the deep with us; and in the resurrection, Jesus rises from death, and so would raise us out of destruction into life. Thus the New Testament describes the resurrection as a victory over the power of death that otherwise would hold us fast. As Paul expressed it, “Death is swallowed up in victory . . . Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (I Cor. 15:54,57)

So the Bible moves past both of the illusions that people commonly have today about what may lie beyond death—the grim idea on the one hand that there is nothing but annihilation, and the fanciful notion on the other hand that we are all just naturally immortal. Biblical writers knew that we are flesh and blood creatures who won’t get anywhere by our own power; as Paul said, “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.” (I Cor. 15:50) But they also were witnesses to the saving power of God through Jesus Christ. As the apostle John put it, “This is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life through His Son.” (I John 5:11)

In future installments of this sermon series, we will explore many further aspects of that promise of eternal life. In the passage we heard from I Corinthians—in a verse to which we will return next week—Paul made the statement, “We shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable.” (I Cor. 15:51-52) So what exactly does the idea of resurrection mean for our promised future? What does it say about our form in eternity? What is the timeline—do people go to heaven at the moment of death, or must we wait until some sort of last trumpet? What happens to people who do not believe in Jesus? You can understand why this series extends through the summer.

The foundation is what we have seen this morning. We do not have to live in hopelessness or in illusion, but we can stand in the sure hope that is given to us in Christ; and we can say then with the apostle Paul, “Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (I Cor. 15:57)