

4th Sunday of Easter

12th May 2019

Ecclesiastes 3:19-20

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Waking Up

If you knew that tomorrow was your last day on earth, if you knew with 100% certainty that you were going to die tomorrow, what would you spend today doing? I presume for everyone, the first thing you'd do is queue up a few of my sermons to listen to, but I mean after that. What would you spend your last 24 hours on earth doing?

For me, I would want to spend that time with my family and friends. Hopefully that time would also include some really fine scotch and a really good steak as well. Maybe if I knew in time to plan ahead,

we could all spend that last day at some exotic location seeing or doing things that are too expensive or too extravagant to do when time isn't so limited. But mostly, I'd want to spend my last hours with the people I love.

What I would not do is to spend my last moments on earth being as destructive as possible simply because I knew there wouldn't be any consequences. I would not use my final hours to go around seeking revenge on people who have wronged me, or stealing from others to fund some epic ultimate adventure. I would not want my last moments to be spent

doing things that hurt others, either my loved ones or strangers. Which is to say that you could take away the threat of any consequences for my actions, but it wouldn't change the things I value and want to spend my time doing. And I doubt I'm in the minority there.

But I cannot even begin to tell you how many conversations I've had with people in churches throughout my career who ask me, with all sincerity, why people would choose to behave, to act with justice or with kindness, if you take away the threat of eternal damnation or punishment. Putting the question another way, what, other than the threat of eternal punishment or the promise of eternal reward, what else would ever compel anyone to refrain from simply devolving into destructive hedonism with reckless abandon?

The overwhelmingly predominant understanding of Christianity in the west has been that we live in a three tiered world. Heaven is above us, in the sky, and is a place of paradisiacal bliss. Hell is below us, the realm of Satan and evil and eternal fire. And we live caught in between the two places. If we're good in this life and accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we get to be raised up to heaven after death and spend eternity in paradise. If we misbehave or, God forbid, end up following a different religion than Christianity, we will spend eternity burning in hell as punishment for our disobedience.

Now, to put this in a cosmic perspective for a moment, the sun has existed in stable form for around 4 billion years, and has another 4 billion to go before most of the hydrogen in its core

has been used and a relatively smaller mass of helium remains. Life on earth will be over at that point. The universe, of course, has been around much longer and will continue to exist long beyond the years of our sun, but let's conservatively estimate our eternity in heaven or hell as the 4 billion years left before anything in or near earth is going to wind up being burned away in the hellfires of a dying star anyway.

Now, let's say you are blessed with a generous lifespan of 100 years on this earth. That means that 100 years of your actions or decisions will result in 4 billion years of heaven or hell. To put it another way, your entire cosmic existence is determined by choices and actions you make in just .0000025% (25 ten millionths of one percent) of that existence. Bringing

those numbers a little closer to our timespan, that means you have exactly one minute, exactly sixty seconds to determine your fate for the next 76 years. And then we're all going to burn anyway.

That's an awful lot hinging on a terribly short amount of time relatively speaking, and if you don't play those odds right, you're looking at a pretty harsh and unforgiving sentence from God. And that's presuming eternity isn't really eternity, but merely 4 billion years.

The idea of hell, at least in the way it's popularized in modern Christianity, never existed in the Bible. In the New Testament, "hell" is most often a translation of the word "Gehenna," meaning "the valley of Hinnom." It was an actual place outside Jerusalem that was something of a perpetually burning garbage dump.

Occasionally someone, most likely the Mafia, would toss dead bodies in there, either to cover up a crime or simply to dispose of people no one cared about. Jesus used Gehenna as a way to talk about the temporality of life rather than eternal condemnation. The Hebrew Bible talks about a place called Sheol. It was the Hebrew word for the Greek idea of Hades - the place where all the dead go. It wasn't a place of torment - it was simply the place for the dead.

While some of the early Church theologians did talk about hell, they spoke of it as a temporary place where you went only until your sins were burned away. In early church theology, everyone eventually ended up in heaven. It wasn't until a church council in 544 CE that Hell was declared to be a place of eternal torment. What this means is that

there is simply no biblical basis at all, in the Old or the New Testaments, for the existence of a place of eternal punishment. If Trump wins again in 2020, we may come close, but even that will only feel like an eternity of hell. It won't be an actual eternity.

But what about heaven? Jesus had a lot to say about the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God, depending on which gospel you're reading. But every time his disciples or anyone else asked him about an afterlife, he responded by talking about how they acted in this life. So whatever heaven is, however heaven is to be understood, Jesus cared very little about it as a destination after death, but talked an awful lot about it as a potential reality in this life. And that vision of heaven is something we are tasked with creating.

So heaven and hell, at

least to the extent we encounter them in the Bible, are not places we go after we die. They are possibilities for how we experience this life. Which means that whether we end up in heaven or hell is, after all, up to us and our actions and attitudes. We can choose to place ourselves in hell when we let hate or vitriol or resentment govern our actions and separate us from community. Or we can experience heaven when we reach across barriers, welcome others, and practice Christ-like love.

So if heaven and hell are real, more as experiences than as literal places, but they are about this life, then what does the Bible or the Christian faith have to say about what comes after this life, what happens when we die? Jesus does use the phrase “eternal life” a number of times in the gospels, and several other New Testa-

ment writers do as well. The 13th century German mystic Meister Eckhart (1260-1328 CE) offers, I think, a beautiful way of understanding Jesus’ words. He suggests that the biblical term “eternal life” is a shorthand way of talking about the life that begins in this lifetime and does not cease, that at the time of death, our life dies but our being goes on.

Thus if we have learned to live life at a deep level, that of the true self and of the Christ within, we undergo his death and resurrection, we are “in Christ” and while our life may end, our being becomes part of the eternal Ground of Being. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179 CE), writing about 200 years before Eckhart, writes that “no beauty is lost in the universe.” 900 years later, Einstein theorized that no energy is lost in the universe. So to the extent

that we live our lives at the level of being--sharing in the beauty of creation, taking part in the energy of the universe--then nothing that is a part of our lives and our experience on earth is ever lost.

What I appreciate about the way Eckhart and Hildegard talk of eternal life is the same thing I've mentioned in previous sermons in their series about miracles and virgin births and resurrection. It's a way of understanding Christianity that actually means something to my life and my experience now, and not just either a long time ago or hopefully a long time in the future after I'm dead and gone. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 CE) suggests that there are two resurrections. The first is waking up in this lifetime,

and if you do that, he writes, then you don't have to worry about the second.

So think about what Aquinas is saying. Resurrection isn't a uniquely Christian experience dependent on belief in Jesus Christ. Rather, resurrection is a common human experience. Life is more interesting and more multi-dimensional than we often notice, and waking up to that is to experience resurrection. Waking up to our role in making gratitude and love and justice happen is resurrection. Whatever comes next will take care of itself.

Amen.

