

What Lies Beyond Death's Veil?

From the series: Tough Questions: No Easy Answers

Scripture: Romans 8:19; Luke 20:38

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

What lies beyond death's veil? That is a tough question and there is no easy answer because the experience beyond death is beyond the limit of human experience.

Ah, you say, but there is one who returned to demonstrate that there is life beyond life - Jesus, the resurrected Christ.

And I must respond that that is the witness of the Christian faith, the conviction, the experience that was the catalyst to launch what has become the Christian religion. But, it is an affirmation of faith beyond the kind of verification that settles the matter. And in this series of messages I am simply setting forth what Christian faith proclaims. I am attempting to engage the core questions of human existence in light of a contemporary knowledge of the universe, the human being and society and the historical development of which we are aware.

Religion is a universal phenomenon. In the last century when anthropologists gained access to all peoples of the earth, from the most highly developed societies to the most remote and primitive tribes, this was the discovery. The human being is a religious animal. And why should religion be a universal human phenomenon? Is it not because when that stage of the unfolding development of the universe was reached in which consciousness, self-consciousness, awareness first manifested itself, the human creature who could now get out of his skin and reflect back on himself came to recognize the fact that he was mortal? Members of his clan died. He would die. The human creature, that is, came to the consciousness of his own death.

When I married Nancy I inherited a Siamese cat that I never really accepted, three kids whom I love and a standard poodle named Topaz. I loved Topaz, too, but he developed kidney problems and euthanasia was called for. Then there was Midnight, a black standard poodle whom we loved even though he was emotionally retarded. He, too, died and was given proper burial in a sand dune.

Now there is Hershey, a chocolate brown poodle who is growing older but still acts like an incorrigible puppy.

Topaz, Midnight and Hershey were (are) lovable, affectionate, manifest intelligence - all of that – but do not possess consciousness, self awareness. Consequently, they possess the life instinct, survival instinct, but not awareness of the transitory nature of their canine existence. Hershey never focuses his big brown eyes on me and says, "Pastor, someday I will die and I wonder why."

I go into this at length to help you see that it is our consciousness, our self-awareness that raises the questions at the core of our being:

Where did I come from?

Why am I here?

What is the meaning/purpose of my life?

Is this all there is? What happens at my death?

Nothingness? Existence in another dimension?

It is the attempt to address and answer such core questions that gives rise to religion. It is the common focus and purpose of all religions, not just Christianity.

We tend to forget this. Religion becomes an end in itself: its doctrine something to believe, its cultic forms providing ritual/worship, its moral teaching the way to live in light of its understanding of reality, God, human existence.

Religion, then, continues to provide answers to the core questions, but at a step removed from where we live and wrestle with the questions. Religious doctrine tends to move from an existential answer full of passion to an intellectual discussion filled with arguments and rational discourse.

And then I hear the physician's diagnosis: "You are terminally ill; you have at most six months." Or the love of my life dies, or some other instance that creates shock, trauma, and blackness. Now, I am not satisfied with rational discourse or ancient dogma. Now I really need to know and I plunge into anxious struggle with the reality facing me.

It is out of such angst, struggle, and fear that religion arises. It gets regularized, formalized, sterile. But then I face the darkness and the religious quest becomes intense. Now I seek some light, some meaning and understanding. Now religion comes alive in my experience; now it becomes very real.

It is at the level of existential intensity that I raise the question, "What lies beyond death's veil?" My purpose is not to give you an easy answer; there aren't

any. Nor is it simply to affirm Easter faith in the resurrection. I've done that here for thirty Easters. Rather, I want you to come to understand the question in order to find your way into a place of faith that is your own. If we don't really understand the questions that drive the religious quest, we may have all the classic orthodox answers but we may be devoid of a deeply personal faith that really brings us inner peace and confidence.

So, to the question: "What Lies Beyond Death's Veil?" As I stated above, there are two basic options: Nothing, or Something More.

The option, "Something More", was the nearly universal conviction of all peoples and religion until the 19th century. Even Buddhism and Hinduism, that speak of Nirvana as "Nothingness," view that not as negation of Being. But it is not my intention to attempt to describe such subtleties. Rather, I want to point out that the crisis of belief in some kind of ongoing existence after death is a relatively modern phenomenon and our own 20th century has been shaped by what can be called modern atheism, which can be traced back to the German philosopher/theologian Ludwig Feuerbach.

Feuerbach viewed religion as the result of human projection. God does not exist. God is a human invention created to meet human needs, fears and suffering, and then projected into another realm called heaven. For Feuerbach, religion is projection. Building uncritically on that assumption, we have the development of modern atheism.

Karl Marx, following Feuerbach, claimed religion was the opium of the people, drugging the human race so it endured injustice and suffering in the hope of a better existence beyond in heaven. Marx thus turned from heaven and afterlife to the transformation of earth and this life, calling for the end of human exploitation by the powerful who oppressed the masses.

Sigmund Freud took Feuerbach's projection idea and claimed religion was illusion. No objective reality corresponded to human religions constructions - no God, no heaven, nothing beyond the veil.

The German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, brought this train of thinking to its ultimate logical conclusion, to Nihilism: nothingness - no God, no meaning, no right or wrong. Nietzsche was not happy about such a state of affairs. This is the philosopher who cried out in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, "God is dead; we have killed him," and who, on the threshold of the 20th century, declared, "Nothing is true, all is permitted." His insight drove him mad. He spent the last twelve years of his life in an institution for the insane.

In his work, *The Hidden Face of God*, Richard Elliott Friedman in a chapter dealing with Nietzsche entitled, "The 'Death' of God," writes,

Nietzsche's breakdown, and the elements that it reflected, really does fit as symbolically expressing a culture's breakdown, or at least its arrival at a critical turning point. And at the summit of that culture was its God.

This state of things had been in the making for centuries in that culture. The invention of the printing press made it possible for everyone - not just the priests and the wealthy - to have a Bible, and thus an opportunity to have informed doubts. Copernicus, Galileo, Darwin, new knowledge of the age of the earth, the triumph of science in general, all provided potent grounds for doubts. The development of the state as a challenge to the Church for worldly authority also impinged on the authority of the Church and ultimately God.... Open challenges to the claims of religion by respectable intellectuals of all backgrounds became possible (Hobbes, Spinoza, Thomas Paine, Mark Twain, Tolstoy, etc., etc.) Hegel could write of the death of God. Marx could call religion opium of the masses. Even with the Church, modern biblical criticism became acceptable and, in the formulations of Julius Wellhausen, the father of modern biblical scholarship, it became famous; it was the culmination of a process leading to a new feeling about the Bible, religion, and God. Philosophical, political, scientific, technological, and social forces all were challenging traditional religion and religious establishments in essential ways. (p. 195F)

The spiritual crisis of culture in the West that Nietzsche brought to expression as the 19th century ended came to full bloom in the shaking of the foundations in our century. And if religion's origins lie in the struggle to answer life's core questions and *the* core questions about death and what if anything lies beyond its veil, then, given the crisis of Christian faith in this century, it is no wonder the traditional hope provided by the Christian tradition should be clouded with doubt and loss.

As is so often true, the Church in its various forms and institutional structures, fought a rear guard action, affirming faith in life after life but failing to do so while taking the modern critiques seriously. Dogmatic declaration of faith's content without wrestling with the enlightenment created by new knowledge and a revolutionary understanding of reality is a futile endeavor. Rather, the faith that can still connect with human experience must be shaped in light of a new conception of the universe, of the human being, and the inter-action of God with the world. Such an approach is taken by Hans Küng in his lectures entitled *Eternal Life?* He writes,

The turning point to the modern age, the deepest inversion in the time after the birth of Christ, the dual Copernican turning point - from earth to the sun and at the same time from God to the human being - has to be taken seriously.

That is to say, we are raising the question of eternal life at a time when a completely new scientific *world vision* has come to prevail and the blue outer wall of the heavenly halls as the scene of eternal life has begun

literally to dissolve into the air; when the postulate of the Enlightenment has penetrated everywhere and there is no longer any eternal truth that can evade the critical judgment of reason by an appeal merely to the authority of Bible, tradition or Church, while belief in eternity can no longer be imposed by authority or taken for granted as part of an ideology; when ideological criticism has laid bare the sociological misuse of belief in eternity, so that the latter can never again be made to serve as an empty promise of a hereafter or as a means of stabilizing unjust, inhuman conditions; when the political-cultural predominance of Christianity has ceased, with the result that the denial of an eternal life no longer involves mortal danger and the all-embracing secularization process has produced a shift of consciousness from the hereafter to the here and now, from life after death to life before death, from yearning for heaven to fidelity to earth. (p. 6)

This is the context of our age; it is in this context that we must raise the tough question: What lies beyond death's veil?

Is there nothing?

Is there something more?

Can the "something more" be affirmed with intellectual integrity as well as the passion of faith?

Let us acknowledge that such a conviction was, as indicated above, universally held until the 19th century and the spiritual crisis brought on by the modern scientific understanding of the world. But, let us acknowledge as well that much Christian teaching and preaching did point to the afterlife as consolation and compensation for the suffering and injustice of this life. We must recognize further that such a view did too often lead to passivity toward the wrongs of this world and to the failure fully to live and celebrate this world and our present human experience.

We recognize also that confidence that there was "something more" beyond death's veil is clearly a central proclamation of Christian faith. It was held by the Pharisaic party of the Jewish people during Jesus' time and he shared that belief. We see this in his discussion with the Sadducees in Luke 20. They denied the idea of resurrection and put to Jesus the question about the woman with multiple husbands. In the resurrection life, whose wife would she be?

Jesus claimed the question was nonsensical since what lies beyond is not simply the projection of our present human experience. He then went on to affirm his belief in resurrection reality with an interesting reference to the Hebrew Scriptures - At the burning bush, Moses spoke of God as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Jesus' point is that Moses spoke of God as the

God of those ancient Patriarchs in the present tense - as he spoke. Thus, Jesus argues,

Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to God all of them are alive.

I find that an interesting insight, an interesting use of scripture.

Paul was a Pharisee and so he believed in resurrection but, even more vividly, he had been encountered by the risen Lord in a vision. Thus, in his letter to the Romans he speaks not only of the resurrection of Jesus by God's spirit or breath, but of a future transformation of the whole creation.

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

He speaks of Creation as groaning in labor pains until now - waiting, as it were, to burst forth into the fulfillment of God's intention.

Now, let me be clear; I do not think either Jesus or Paul had some divinely revealed understanding of our present scientific understanding of the universe. However, it is possible to make some sense of the hope, the claim they made in light of what we understand about the nature of humankind and the cosmos.

Paul saw continuity between the universe and human destiny. To be sure, his was the old model of Fall and Redemption. In Paul's view of things, it was human disobedience that cast the cosmos into bondage. Moral fault led to the disruption and decay of the physical universe.

I have suggested that biblical model no longer gives an adequate reflection of the reality of the universe or of ourselves. Instead, I suggested last week a Creation model with the idea of Emergence taking the place of Fall/Redemption. But, it is interesting that Paul did see the intimate connection of cosmic destiny and human destiny. Paul expected the full consummation of the physical universe at the point of the redemption of humanity and he expected it all quite soon. But, of course, in that Paul and Jesus and the whole apocalyptic movement, Jewish and Christian were mistaken.

However, in the model I scratched out in your liturgy last week I set forth in an ascending movement the cosmic reality that has been unfolding all these billions of years -The inorganic level; The organic level; The level of human consciousness; The level of Spirit: Energy coalescing in matter through duration of time, expansion of space moves from the inorganic toward the Spirit.

There are not really four "realities - inorganic/organic/consciousness/spirit, but one continuous reality that moves from one level to the next, not leaving the earlier level but enfolding it in the next. Where is it going?

Jesus claimed the ancients were present to God. "...for to God all are alive."

If God as Mystery is the creative Source of all that is, might God as Mystery as well be the End point or Goal of all that is? Is this amazing cosmic drama, that has come to the point of producing human creatures of Spirit who have a sense of the good, the true, and the beautiful, simply arriving at a "dead end" in the death of the creature so wonderfully endowed?

Hans Küng believes otherwise. After his analysis of the critique of modern atheism and his wrestling with the biblical tradition, it is his conviction that we die, not into Nothingness, but into God.

I appreciate his modest claim as he faces the question, "What lies beyond death's veil?" Putting it in terms of present human existence, he claims, "Not less, but more."

That I believe is a reasonable claim in full light of present knowledge, but it is a *faith* claim.

Thus, my answer to the question is not "Nothing" but "Something more" and I affirm Küng's confidence, "not less, but more."

Let me conclude with two comments.

First, the Church has erred in stressing the afterlife at the expense of this life, heaven at the expense of earth, the future at the expense of the present. The time to live fully and celebrate this amazing human experience is now. And it is now that we are invited to live in the Spirit. Jesus said, "*This is eternal life, that they might know you, the only true God ...*" Eternal life is not a future condition, but a present reality. If one is living now with the consciousness of God present in one's experience, then death is but a transition point, not a radical rupture.

Secondly, understand that while we need always to be thinking our faith and setting our faith in an honest intellectual light, the "answer" to these tough questions lies not in our ability to reason ourselves to intellectual certainty. Faith lays hold of a reality beyond reason's grasp. Finally, one must trust one's heart. I see that so clearly when I walk through the experience of grief with people. There is a comfort of the Spirit, a blessed assurance that is more than any reasonable argument can provide. There are intimations of eternity that only the heart knows as it lives in the spirit in loving awareness, not in contrast to what is reasonable, but beyond reason's limits.

References:

Richard Elliott Friedman. *The Hidden Face of God*. HarperCollins Publishers, 1995.

Hans Küng. *Eternal Life?: Life After Death as a Medical, Philosophical, and Theological Problem*. Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2003.