

“Life After Death”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
All Saints’ Sunday, November 6, 2016
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Luke 20: 27-38 and Ephesians 1: 11-23

Luke 20: 27-38

Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her."

³⁴ Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."

Ephesians 1: 11-23

¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory.

¹⁵I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints,¹⁹and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. ²⁰God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²²And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

For those who wonder about life after death,

Jesus of Nazareth offered words of comfort, saying,
“...those who are considered worthy of a place
...in the resurrection from the dead,
...they are like angels and are children of God,
being children of the resurrection.
And the fact that the dead are raised
Moses himself showed,
in the story about the bush,
where he speaks of the Lord
as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.
Now [God] is God not of the dead, but of the living;
for to [God] all of them are alive.”

For those who wonder about life after death,

the Apostle Paul prayed, saying:
“I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus
and your love toward all the saints,
and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you
as I remember you in my prayers.
...so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened,
you may know what is the hope to which [Jesus] has called you,
what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints...”

For those who wonder about life after death,

know that we all do, wonder, that is, some time or another,
each of us with varying degrees of faith or fear, questions or
confidence,
and sometimes we wonder with all of the above.
Last spring I returned to the church
after presiding at a graveside service in a nearby cemetery.
It was such a beautiful day.
I felt a deep need for a few minutes of alone time with God in the sun.
So I gathered together a legal pad and pen,
and liberated a rocking chair from our church nursery.
I found a corner of the parking lot,
and settled in to process the day, to think and write, to breathe and to be.

A green sedan that I did not recognize wove its way through the church parking lot.
The driver saw me in a wooden rocking chair,
eased his car in my direction, then slowed down to stop 5 ft away.
I had not recognized his car.
When he lowered the driver’s window I recognized his face.

John lives not far away, in an Atlanta suburb,
and has worshiped God here on multiple occasions.

At one time he and his family were active members
before his parents moved to a retirement home.
The last three times we worshipped God together
I presided at his only sibling's graveside service after a tragic car accident;
and then I presided at his father's funeral service;
and the third time we worshipped God side by side
was when I presided at his mother's memorial
service.

John sat in his car and I in my rocking chair, just about eye to eye.
He asked about my day,

so I shared that I had just come from a funeral of a beloved saint,
and was taking a breather to process the experience.

I told John, *"There was a family with five children at the cemetery.
They were all elementary age and younger.*

They were so well-behaved.

*Their eyes were locked on the casket and on the open hole in the soil and on me,
on the bright robe and festive stole, and appeared to listen to the eulogy.*

They were taking in everything they could

from the communal celebration of God's gift of life and life after death.

When the liturgy was over I made it a point to seek out the family.

*I asked the parents for permission to speak with their children,
which they gave.*

I knelt down on the green grass and got on their eye level.

I told them, 'It is so good that you are here today. Children should be at funerals.

When I was your age my little sister died of sudden infant death syndrome.

*As sad as I was, and as sad my whole family felt,
my parents taught me about how much God loves us,
that God loves us so much*

we are raised to life everlasting after we pass away.

*My parents said that my sister Carol was in heaven forever
and was whole and complete;*

she lives forever with God and all those who have passed on before us.

And then I told them that after her funeral

I felt so comfortable talking about life after death

that sometimes I helped my friends when they lost loved ones.

Over time that gift of helping people became, for me,

a vocation, a calling, a lifelong ministry

of comforting people in times of need or sadness or loneliness.

*So, I said, it is good for children to be here, in a cemetery, at a graveside service,
and maybe if you found some comfort in your sadness*

now you know how you can comfort a friend who feels sad.'

*When I stood up after kneeling on the grass my knees cracked, really loudly,
so who knows what they will remember most."*

John was very still in his car.

He sat with that story for a minute or two.

John said, *“When I was a reporter for a newspaper
I went to the funeral of a couple boys who had fallen through thin ice
(on a frozen lake) and drowned.
I got a headache at the funeral because the preacher said
that it was a part of God’s plan.
Somehow I don’t think it was a part of God’s plan
that these two innocent boys perish in icy cold water.”*

I let that set for a bit.

He did, too.

*“John, what did you find to be comforting,” I asked,
“in your own grief when first your father & then your mother passed away?”
“The soothing tone and words of hope,” he said,
“that I received here at First Christian Church of Decatur.”*

For those who wonder about life after death,

John needed to hear words and tones of hope from his people, his God.
We spoke in the church parking lot
about the unfortunate theology that professes
it is God’s will or plan or purpose for the innocent to suffer.
*“This makes God cruel,” I said.
“Who wants to follow or trust or confide in or sacrifice for a deity who is heartless?”*

In 1981, Rabbi Harold Kushner published a book called

When Bad Things Happen to Good People

Rabbi Kushner and his wife had just lost their beloved son
to a disease called Progeria, which is a rare genetic disorder
that has symptoms of rapid aging.

After his son’s tragic death

there were so many different things that people said to the rabbi,
words that people hoped, intended, meant
to sound helpful and comforting about the nature of God
and the purpose of human suffering.

Rabbi Kushner put his response down on paper.

He used as one of his main scriptures the story of a man named Job [pages 31-45][1]

Job is a biblical myth to help us to understand the meaning of suffering and death.

In the story Job was a fortunate and pious man.

Satan charges that Job is pious only because he is fortunate.

To prove a point, God lets Satan take away all Job has,

including his children, and to cover his body with boils.

Three friends come to visit Job, and their conversations are the bulk of the book.

Job complains that his suffering is an injustice from God.

His friends defend the idea that God is just with a variety of arguments,

including that Job must have done something to deserve his suffering.

Job declares his innocence and challenges God to be his accuser.

God appears in a whirlwind and points out that He and Job are not equals.
Job is silenced.

In the end, God reproves Job's friends and restores Job's health and fortune.

Harold Kushner writes,

“To try to understand the book and its answer, let us take note of three statements which everyone in the book, and most of the readers, would like to be able to believe:

- A God is all-powerful and causes everything that happens in the world.
Nothing happens without God's will.
- B God is just and fair, and stands for people getting what they deserve,
so that the good prosper and the wicked are punished.
- c Job is a good person.

Kushner said, “As long as Job is healthy and wealthy,

we can believe all three of those statements at the same time with no difficulty.

When Job suffers, when he loses his possessions, his family and his health,
[then] we have a problem.

We can no longer make sense of all three propositions together.

We can now affirm any two only by denying the third.

“If God is both just and powerful,

then Job must be a sinner who deserves what is happening to him.

“If Job is good but God causes his suffering anyway,

then God is not just.

“If Job deserved better and God did not send his suffering,

then God is not all-powerful...”

Job's friends are prepared to stop believing in (C),
the assertion that Job is a good person. ...

Job's solution is to reject proposition (B),
the affirmation of God's goodness.

Job is in fact a good man,
but God is so powerful that He is not limited
by considerations of fairness and justice. ...

Kushner then sums up the argument, saying,

“Let me suggest that the author of the Book of Job
takes the position which neither Job nor his friends take.

[The author of Job] believes in God's goodness and in Job's goodness,
and is prepared to give up his belief in proposition (A):
that God is all-powerful.” [37-42]

“God wants the righteous to live peaceful, happy lives,
[yet] sometimes even [God] can't bring that about.

It is too difficult even for God
to keep cruelty and chaos from claiming their innocent victims.
But could [humanity], without God, do it better?” [43]

I shared with John my takeaway from Job, from life's lessons,
from hearing his story of the two children who drowned in a lake.
*"John, God is good. The children are good, too.
God is not in control of the physics of slushy ice and heavy human bodies.
God was present in the mercy and care given to the families;
God was present in the cold water as the children took their last breaths;
and God was present to ensure that their last breath on earth
was followed by their first breath in heaven.
This is the God I know and follow,
one who is loving and kind,
slow to anger and sure to forgive."*

Was it, is it, will it ever be God's plan for the innocent to suffer?
I think not. I hope not. I believe not.
Sometimes there is no reason.
Sometimes pain and misfortune befall us and our neighbors
and simply make no sense.
Sometimes God is powerless to stop a tragedy from happening,
and yet oh so powerful as a provider,
as a supreme source of strength, of sustenance, of salvation.

For those who wonder about life after death,
consider what John would have heard
here in this sacred space:
there is no statute of limitations on grief and grieving.

Feeling the deep sadness of the loss of a loved one
is like standing on the shore of an ocean.

The waves roll in and wash over you and then recede,
and then wash over and recede again and again.
Allow the waves of grief wash over you;
feel them; experience them;
trust that God is with you in your sadness, weeping alongside you.
The waves will recede,
the sharp pain of loss will lessen,
and you will sense some relief.
Over time and in life's journey
the waves of grief come and wash over us,
and then they recede for a while.
Please be strong when some says to you,
"Oh, it has been a week, a month, a year, ten years.
Why do you still grieve? Let it go. Move on."

There is no statute of limitations on grief and grieving.

Missing our loved ones is one way we have for remembering,
for cherishing, for holding their memories near and dear to our hearts.

For those who wonder about life after death,

consider what John discerned here in this significant community of faith:
after we pass on we are made whole.

In life after death we are different.

Life after death is not a continuation, a furtherance of life like we experience on earth.

This is what Jesus meant, what he taught, what he testified

when the Sadducees asked Jesus

a bizarre question about whom a woman might be married to
in heaven if she has had seven husbands.

Jesus was like, dude, that is not the point.

Look at Moses' conversation with God, He said,

back when the Lord wanted to get Moses' attention.

God set a bush on fire and Moses noticed that it was not consumed.

Moses knew he was on holy ground so he took off his shoes.

"Who do I tell the people it was who sent me?"

"I AM WHO I AM."

Moses went on to tell the Pharaoh, the Hebrews,

and through them to tell us, his spiritual descendents,

that the Lord is identified as the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob.

God spoke to Moses of long dead, historic spiritual ancestors

as if they were still alive, which they were...and are.

Jesus himself drew comfort and hope from the Lord's words of assurance.

We, too, may find some comfort.

Those who have gone on to be a part of the great cloud of witnesses

are alive and well, living forever in the presence of God.

Life after death is different, not a continuation,

of what we experience here on earth.

In the everlasting presence of God rather than divisiveness there is unity;

rather than brokenness there is wholeness;

rather than despair there is joy.

For those who wonder about life after death,

consider what John might have heard here in this safe place:

there is a communion of saints who have gone before us

with whom we can still communicate.

You may recall or have heard about when Sarah Westbrook,

our church organist Kathy Westbrook's mother in law,

was in hospice care,

your pastor and our elders and her family visited with her.

In her last week of life on earth we would enter into her room

only to find her already in an animated conversation,

even though all we could see was Sarah and she had all her faculties.
She would say, “*Don’t you see them?*” “*See who?*” “*My uncle of course.*”
She would name names of family members who had died years before,
spirits who crossed over to prepare her, to show her the way home,
sent to assure Sarah that she was in good hands, that she was in God’s hands.
Sarah Westbrook had no fear of death or dying;
she was going home to be with her loved ones in heaven.
Silly church folks; we went to minister to Sarah, yet it was she who witnessed to us.

When my dad died eleven years ago
my father in law (actually I call Don Brewer my father in love)
pulled me aside to share
what a church elder told him when his dad died decades
earlier.

“*Don,*” said his elder, “*do you remember all those heart-to-heart talks
while sitting on a log with your father? Well, you still can.*”
Don said to me, “*Son, you can still have heart-to-heart talks with your dad.*”
And I still do.

For two who wonder about life after death,

John and I prepared to part company;
he to his commute and me to my processing,
We drew from this gift of life everlasting that if God’s grace is true
all will be saved,
all will be made well, all will be unified and resurrected.

We, my friends, can draw from this gift of life everlasting that if God’s grace is true
that there is nothing on earth is to stop us
from behaving and believing and belonging
as if heaven is a place on earth.

We can draw from this gift of life everlasting that if God’s grace is true
we give our dearly departed loved ones honor and glory
when we let the best of their life and love
carry on in and through us.

Let us treasure the best, release the worst,
and trust in the Lord to help heal the brokenness
and help us to celebrate the newness.

Let us practice justice without judgment;
seek unity without polarization;
and find joy inside our tears,
tears that God wipes away,
tears that cleanse the soul,
tears that stain our cheeks

and reflect the light of the sun in the sky and the
Son of God.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!