

“What Will It Be Like After You Die?”
February 13, 2011
Grove Presbyterian Church

We call each other by many animal names. Some cute: she’s a fox.

You guys use them: Bobcats, Bears, Wolf, Eagles.

Then there are animal insults:

- ⇒ He’s a real pig
- ⇒ She’s a real shrew
- ⇒ Stop being such a mouse

Can you, Scouts, think of others?

How appropriate, because we are animals. Animals. Mammals. We do everything barn yard animals do.

The difference is, we know it. Cows don’t.

The difference is, we are aware of being aware. Pigs can’t.

The difference is, we talk about it. Mice don’t discuss the profound meaning of mice-ness.

And the really big difference is? Drum roll please. We mammals know we are going to die.

Animals don’t.

Animals may sniff the scent of death or danger, but they lack the awareness of finitude and mortality.

Only the human animal could and would write so many poems and songs about death and dying..

Only the human animal (homo sapiens sapiens) could and would ask a question such as today’s confirmation class question:

“What Will It Be Like After You Die?”

Such is our blessing and our curse of self-awareness. It haunts us. Dogs and pigs don’t have funeral services for pigs and dogs. Yet humans from the very anthropological beginnings had such ceremonies.

What exactly is beyond the beyond?

Well, folks, there's lots of way of answering this question.

People have plenty of different views about the afterlife.

Some say there is nothing, that this is all there is – well, that seems pretty pointless then.

Some speak of the mystical legacy of our influence and significance to those who follow us, our immortality is because they remember – well, that's nice but how many of you can remember the name of your grandparents parents or even your last Scout Master?

Some imagine the special among us will get whoosked away to some mysterious planet in a galaxy, far far away -- well, that's just plain weird.

Reincarnation suggests, akin to physics, that the spiritual energy remains a constant even if the housing changes, this container called flesh – well, that seems really monotonous.

Those into vague spiritualism suggest that upon death our spirit is released and we merge with the great spiritual truth – well, that seems terribly anonymous.

Islam or fundamentalist Christianity argue pretty much the same thing, that you get either heaven or hell as reward for how you lived here, sort of like earning a merit badge – well, if that's the case, I'm not so sure who really qualifies for a punched ticket to heaven. Besides, who ever said that the main reason to be a Christian is to get into heaven?

Gandalf's view in "The Lord of the Rings" comes close to comforting

Pippin: I didn't think it would end this way.

Gandalf: End? No, the journey doesn't end here. Death is just another path... One that we all must take. The grey rain-curtain of this world rolls back, and all turns to silver glass... And then you see it.

Pippin: What? Gandalf?... See what?

Gandalf: White shores... and beyond, a far green country under a swift sunrise.

Pippin: Well, that isn't so bad.

Gandalf: No... No it isn't.

But then I didn't realize heaven was England...

There remains one belief about the afterlife that, for me, gives me purpose here and now.

Listen:

But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain.

But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish.

There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory.

We’ve been asking the same question for 2,000 years. Been asking it for 55,000 years.

Paul speaks here of the resurrection of the dead. Jesus’ Easter resurrection is the testimony of what will be for us.

Paul goes on in a few verses later to describe how flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God

Whew, that resolves the worry of some whose bodies get blown to mincemeat by cannons or whose family cremates the dearly beloved. Some fret that they’d be much too tiny of bits to get physically reshaped and repackaged.

Paul believes that this meat isn’t what is destined for heaven. And yet, being a good Jew, he doesn’t wish to disparage this flesh as if it is simply a corruptible, contemptible housing or a package for the real us. This flesh is us, even if this flesh has died thousands of times already. The baby Bob flesh died off 57 years ago. This flesh keeps changing. Yet it is all me.

Your body is how you know the world.

Your body is how the world knows you.

Your body is how you act upon the world.

This body is all we have. All of it is one: flesh, soul, spirit, memory, hope, reason. We cannot dissect out one from the other. It is all who we are.

In the Bible, Paul wants us to avoid mistaking the body with the flesh. Different words are used. Flesh in Greek is the word, *sark*, as in sarcoma or sarcasm, which literally means, ‘the tearing of the flesh.’ Body is another word altogether – it is *soma*, as in somatic. It refers to our very being, our unique identity.

Which is something incredible to ponder here. Uniqueness. There is and never has nor ever will be another you. You are the only one. One of a kind, throughout all time, all history. Nobody will ever have your fingerprints or your DNA or your experiences.

Pretty cool. That makes you pretty special.

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So if flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom, what does? What is destined for the afterlife?

Which is why Paul is pretty crafty to make sure he speaks of our spiritual body. Which is why Paul is pretty careful to proclaim a bodily resurrection as opposed to a physical resurrection (in the sense of flesh-physical). If we speak of bodily, then we're talking about the resurrection, the raising up after our deaths of our being-hood, of our uniqueness, of our very essence. This avoids that silliness that comes with us trying to figure out what we are going to look like in heaven. Will we all be young again? Will we recognize each other?

It isn't flesh. It isn't some divine re-creation of us here. It is altogether different. It is altogether glorified. That's the word I find helpful to remember. Glorified.

We are given a glorified body, not just a patched up version of this old thing.

C. S. Lewis in one of his fictions paints heaven, the afterlife, as the real reality. In heaven, that is where we shine, that is where we have substance, that is where we have weight, that is where we are completely and utterly one with joy and love.

It is here, he writes, that is the unreal. Here is the grey, the small, the hunger, the isolation, more the wanting to be loved than truly loving.

The term 'afterlife' itself is a misnomer. There is no afterlife. What is to come is the real life; all of this, with all its wonders and sorrows, is pre-life.

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Let me ask this:

Is the seedling the same as the crop?

Is the apple seed the same as the apple tree?

Is the muddy bulb the same as the flowering lily?

Is the acorn the same as the mighty oak tree?

No.

And yes.

The acorn has within it that mighty oak tree. The tree is the acorn fulfilled, glorified. Would the tree recognize itself as the acorn? Probably not. Would the acorn see itself as the oak tree? Probably not.

But they are the same. Only, one is glorified; the other is potential. Hello, seedlings.

For the acorn to become the tree, it first must be planted; it requires the stimulus from soil, water, sun. It requires forces beyond it to make it what it can be.

So do we. In death, we are planted. According to our time keeping -- we creatures self-conscious of mortality and clock -- we are dormant. We are dead. We sleep. Like the sleeper asleep, we don't even know we are waiting or even that we are asleep. The joy is, once dead, we are free from time and all time then collapses into one brilliant eternal moment.

Have you been so tired you put your head on the pillow? You awaken a second later only to discover you have been asleep for eight hours? When asleep, it seems we are free from time. When dead, we really are.

*Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to KEEP;
if I die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

One short sleep past, we wake eternally [John Donne].

This here then is some sort of wonderful God given dream, and then we are awakened....

Why then should I be afraid of falling asleep?