

SERMON for April 21, 2024, the 4th Sunday of Easter (B)

at Grace Lutheran, Victoria by Jim Hill

TEXTS: Job 14:7-17 (special for this theme), Psalm 23, John 10:11-18

TITLE: "Life After Death"

A couple of months ago, my wife Dawn invited one of our neighbours over to our house for some wine-tasting and hors-d'oeuvres. She was a successful businesswoman before she retired, and we enjoy her company because she's fun to talk with -- a very honest, direct, no-nonsense person. "Shoots from the lip", as they say. Also, her little spaniel dog and our little Schnauzer get along well together.

So there we were in our living room, enjoying some light conversation, when suddenly she looked at me and said, "Do you believe in life after death?" I replied just as directly: "Yes, I'm certain of it. No doubt in my mind." I paused and waited for her to follow up on that, but she didn't. And I wasn't going to expand on my reply unless I got some clue from her that she wanted me to say more. But she didn't say anything more about it, so that was end of that topic! We just went on with our wine and light conversation.

This morning, I want to say more about it, about the Afterlife. First of all, because it's a major doctrine of our Christian faith, and also because, the nearer that I get to the end of my life, the more I think about it.

Also, many people these days are wondering whether human life on our planet is going to survive through to the end of this 21st century. I read the Globe and Mail newspaper pretty-well every day, and watch the PBS news, and it seems to me that the way things are going, the future looks grim, maybe terminal.

Climate change is not being reversed, worldwide pollution is not being reduced, and many poor in the world are starving. For that and some other reasons, people's anxiety and fear and anger are growing, and civil violence is becoming more common around the world. Also, more and more national leaders, especially dictators, are getting more belligerent, and recent new wars are putting the whole world in danger of conflagration.

And then there is the danger of the rapid advancement of Artificial Intelligence. This past week Dawn and I watched a one-hour special on the PBS series NOVA, called "AI Revolution", which showed how much AI has improved people's lives through medical advances and the rapid invention of new scientific tools, including ways to slow down

climate change. On the other hand, AI is potentially very dangerous, if it's used by people with evil intentions. In the wrong hands, it could lead to a kind of "Big-Brother" control, with a profound but hidden influence over our lives. And AI will probably lead to more sophisticated remote-control weapons of war, including radical disinformation. Sounds to me like a nightmare scenario!

What I'm saying is that it behooves us to be ready when the End comes, whether it's the end of our lives in this world, or the end of the world itself.

So it's worth discussing what might happen after we die. Is there a life hereafter? There are three reasons why I believe there is a life after death:

First, it's a very rational and logical notion.

Second, it's affirmed by God's word in Holy Scriptures.

And third, God's love for you and me is eternal, and strong enough to take us through death and beyond.

First of all, the notion of life after death is rational and logical.

Each one of us is a miraculous creation of God. We have a body and a mind that are amazingly complex. Our brain, for example, is made up of well over 80 billion neurons – more likely 100 billion – little nerve cells that send messages all over our body, to coordinate everything, as well as allowing us to understand the world and control the world around us. In that sense, we are gods (with a small "g" – even the Bible says that). And there's an awareness in our mind and spirit that tells us that we could live forever, if it weren't for the fragility of our bodies.

But, alas, all of us die. Our bodies wear out far too soon, which raises a protest in our minds, that there must be more. The guitarist, singer, and songwriter Bruce Coburn, who's a Christian, released a song in 1980 called "There Must Be More". We sense it. We know that our lives should not be so fragile and short. It's as if each of us is one little rain-drop in a vast ocean of time. That can't be all there is!

We have a mind that can study and comprehend the universe we live in, and even comprehend (as animals cannot do) the miracle of our own minds and bodies. God allowed humans to be scientists, and we've now come to understand that the smallest particle of matter, the smallest particle of a particle, is not a particle at all, just a tiny bit of energy!

We are made of energy, in a universe full of energy, yet we are so weak and frail and limited. But we are conscious, and we know instinctively that we were made for more than one life, this life that is “nasty, brutish, and short” as the 17th-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes called it.

The Old Testament doesn't say anything theologically about life after death, but it does record instances of dead people being called back up from “Sheol”, the abode of the dead. And we have Old Testament characters who wonder about the possibility of life after death. For instance, in the book of Job, chapter 14, Job says:

*¹² “... mortals lie down and do not rise again;
until the heavens are no more, they will not awake
or be roused out of their sleep.”*

And then Job prays to God that there will be more!

*¹³ “O that you would hide me in Sheol,
that you would conceal me until your wrath is past,
that you would appoint me a set time and remember me!*

*¹⁴ If mortals die, will they live again? All the days of my service I would wait until
my release should come.*

*¹⁵ You would call, and I would answer you;
you would long for the work of your hands.”*

My friends, it makes good sense that, after their death, God will have mercy on those who suffered their whole life long or who died prematurely in childhood because of the cruelty of adults. I think of Ukrainian children who have been maimed or killed by Russian bombs and drones, or African children who have died of starvation. I can't believe that that's all there is for them! No life after death? It seems irrational and illogical that a God of justice and mercy would not provide for them a better place to go after death.

It also makes sense that evil people who are responsible for those deaths should get some just punishment after they die. And, there certainly have been a lot of terribly evil people throughout history who seem have avoided punishment for their crimes just by dying. I think, for instance, of tyrants like Genghis Khan, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Mao Zedong, power-hungry and ruthless leaders responsible for the deaths of millions of people. I think of Hitler, for example, who committed suicide in his bunker to avoid punishment. Surely God has sentenced him to hell for his crimes. It seems very logical and reasonable to me.

In Matthew chapter 10 (verses 28-30) we hear the words of Jesus:

“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, fear the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your [heavenly] Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

If we have a God like that, a God of both justice and mercy, then life after death is a concept that makes perfect sense.

The Second reason for my belief in an Afterlife is that God’s word in Holy Scriptures affirms it again and again. There are many Bible passages I could give you, but here are a few of my favourites:

In John 11:21-26, Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother [Lazarus] would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

Another Bible passage is 1st Thessalonians 4: 13-14. Here the apostle Paul writes, "(But). . . we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died."

And to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 15: 42-45) Paul said that our death is like a seed, sown in the ground, which must die in order to sprout and come back to life as a new plant. Paul writes: "So it will be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body."

And, of course, there’s John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life."

My favourite verse, however, is in Luke chapter 23 (verses 42 and 43), where the one of the criminals hanging on the cross next to Jesus, says: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus replies, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Finally, the third reason I believe that there’s a life after death is because God loves us. God’s love for me is the reason I’m a Christian and it’s my motivation for living. I believe that God is eternal, and that God’s love for you and me is also eternal.

A child knows when a parent loves them, and therefore they believe, they trust that, if they get in trouble, or are in danger, that parent will rescue them, with all their might, with all their strength, with all the resources they can muster.

God’s love for us is like that. And since God is eternal and has infinite power to back up that love, we have every reason to trust in God’s power and love. We have every reason to believe that the death we must die because of our weakness, will not be the end of us.

Have any of you heard of Henri Nouwen? He was a Dutch Catholic priest, a professor, writer and theologian, who died in 1996. He was known especially for his wonderful books, 39 of them, plus hundreds of published articles.

His books are usually short, but they say a lot, and contain some unforgettable stories. A book that he wrote near the end of his life is called “Flying Falling Catching”, and I want to read to you what he says that he learned in a conversation with a trapeze artist named Rodleigh.

. . . . One day, I was sitting with Rodleigh, the leader of the (trapeze) troupe, in his caravan, talking about flying. He said, “As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. He has to be there for me with split-second precision and grab me out of the air as I come to him in the long jump.”

“How does it work?” I asked.

“The secret,” Rodleigh said, “is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. When I fly to Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me and pull me safely over the apron behind the catch bar.”

“You do nothing!” I said, surprised.

“Nothing,” Rodleigh repeated. “The worst thing the flyer can do is to try to catch the catcher. I am not supposed to catch Joe. It’s Joe’s task to catch me. If I grabbed Joe’s wrists, I might break them, or he might break mine, and that would be the end for both of us. A flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch, and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that his catcher will be there for him.”

When Rodleigh said this with so much conviction, the words of Jesus flashed through my mind: “Father into your hands I commit my Spirit.” Dying is trusting in the catcher. To care for the dying is to say, “Don’t be afraid. Remember that you are the beloved child of God. He will be there when you make your long jump. Don’t try to grab him; he will grab you. Just stretch out your arms and hands and trust, trust, trust.”

Amen.

*Not included in the above sermon is
this little poem by the famous French poet
Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918):*

Come to the edge.
No, we will fall.
Come to the edge.
No, we will fall.
They came to the edge.
He pushed them, and they flew.

PRAYERS FOR EASTER 4 Good Shepherd Sunday (with Earth Day)

April 21, 2024 Grace Lutheran Church

Almighty God, send Your Holy Spirit, so that we may grow in faith and hope, confident you are present in all our circumstances, as we journey through our lives towards the glorious future You have in store for us.

Almighty God, give us the courage and resolve to do that which is ours to do as a member of your living body, the Church, and in the company of the full communion of saints. Help us to give generously of ourselves, to show compassion to the suffering, firmness toward the arrogant, generosity toward the poor, and mercy toward all.

Almighty God, help us always to be thankful for all the good things you have given us: a roof over our heads and a place to call home, the manmade conveniences and amenities and the natural beauty that we see and appreciate in your Creation, in our neighbourhoods, in our region, in our province and across our country. Move us to share our blessings recognizing that this abundance is all gift that we have received.

Almighty God, renew Your Holy Spirit within us, and move us to a stronger commitment to care for the preservation, protection, and restoration of your Creation, that we share with one other.

Almighty God, inspire powerful people in countries across the world, to be more open and willing to heed the growing evidence of the effects of climate change on the health and well-being of individuals, and the serious impact on livelihoods and communities most affected by climate change. Give each of us the courage to act urgently and wisely, so that our common home, this earth, may be healed and restored. Help us to appreciate our interdependence on one another, to regard all living and non-living beings as precious gifts from you that must be protected and preserved for the well-being of all, that all people may delight in it, now and by future generations.

Almighty God, we pray that you would continue to raise up individuals who will lead our nation with justice, firmness and fairness. Bless all who work on our behalf in all levels of government. Give them, and us, the courage to make decisions that will protect our beautiful country, and to preserve our lands and clean air, our oceans, rivers and lakes, our fields and farms, our forests and animals of the air, the waters, and of the land.

Almighty God, we pray for our congregation, that we may be mission-minded and are generous in sharing what we have with others. Help us not to fear our weaknesses, but to build on our strengths, so that You, our Creator, may be glorified. Give us wisdom and harmony as we discern your plans for the future of Grace Lutheran Church. Equip us and give us the strength to carry out those plans.

Almighty God, we pray for the healing of those relatives and friends and members of our congregation who are frail or ill, and who need a new spirit of courage and confidence and faith in Your healing power. We pause to name them now, aloud or in silence ... We give thanks for the miracle of both twins having grown strong enough to survive their birth. Continue to strengthen them, that they might grow and thrive; and give hope and encouragement to their parents and all those who support this family.

These prayers and any others we have on our hearts today, we offer up to You, O God, trusting in your abundant love and grace, through Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN.

Our Father ...