



Westminster Presbyterian Church
1200 Marquette Avenue
Minneapolis, MN 55403
(612) 332-3421
www.westminstermpls.org

Imagining Life Beyond Life

Timothy Hart-Andersen

Sunday, November 6, 2022

Psalm 23; Revelation 21:1-6a

We've been exploring the importance to people of faith of the capacity to imagine beyond what we cannot see. Perhaps nothing in Christianity relies more on imagination than does the issue of what happens when we die.

It's a question as old as human consciousness and has been one of the animating impulses in the spread of religion across the globe. Every religious tradition tries to resolve the dilemma one way or another.

Islam believes in an afterlife determined by how one lives on this earth. Hinduism believes in reincarnation, as does Buddhism, with some important differences. Surprisingly, according to the Pew Research Center, 24% of American Christians believe in reincarnation, which appears nowhere in scripture. (25 percent of US Christians believe in reincarnation. What's wrong with this picture? | America Magazine)

Judaism – unlike other traditions – spends little time concerned with what happens at death. Instead, it centers

on the here and now and the sacredness of life. The Hebrew Scriptures do hint at life after death, using metaphors which we Christians have found helpful. And the ancient texts also refer to the messianic age to come, which leads many Jews to embrace eventual resurrection.

Judaism has been in the news recently – not about their views on the afterlife, but because of the frightening rise in antisemitism from various quarters. We should be attentive to this as Christians. We should be clear in condemning language that perpetuates stereotypes and prejudice and can lead to violence against our Jewish neighbors. Jews are our older siblings. Much of what we Christians believe – including about death – springs from Judaism.

From the Hebrew prophets of old to the last pages of Christian scripture, Jews and followers of Jesus share a view that God the Creator will love us beyond life on this earth. Isaiah imagines a mountaintop feast at which God “will wipe the tears from every face and death will be no more.” The Book of Revelation offers a similar vision of life beyond death:

“God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:4) Christianity’s understanding of life beyond life centers around our trust in resurrection. “If for this life only we

have hoped in Christ," the Apostle Paul says, "We are of all people most to be pitied." (I Corinthians 15:19)

We affirm that Jesus broke free from death, opening the way to eternal life. How precisely that happens cannot be known. Both Jesus and Paul try to help us by using the metaphor of a seed to help us imagine life beyond life.

"What you sow does not come to life unless it dies," Paul says.

"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 God has chosen and to each kind of seed its own body." (I Corinthians 15:36-38)

Paul was working hard to help his contemporaries understand life beyond death. "So it is with the resurrection of the dead," he says. "What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable...It is sown a physical body; it is raised a spiritual body."

But the Apostle recognizes what we all know: we cannot be certain. Finally, he says, "Look, I will tell you a mystery...We will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet." (I Corinthians 15:42; 51-52)

Composer Charles Ives once described the power of music in a way that speaks to the mystery Paul and the rest of us face at death. Ives spoke not of the unknown, but of the

“in-known,” that is, “Something we can sense profoundly even if we can’t fully grasp or explain it.” (NYTimes, John Mauceri: Classical Music Still Plays in the Theater of War; 10/30/22)

The in-known is what the Epistle to the Hebrews calls “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.”

In other words, when facing the mystery of life beyond life, our faith invites us to imagine, and to trust.

Every person, religious or not. eventually wonders about death. The finality of the end of life, when we face it, confronts us with the prospect of our own mortality. It’s difficult to comprehend our individual personhood ceasing to exist or to make peace with that coming reality.

On this All Saints’ Day we should note that the same is true about the reality of the loss of a loved one. As we hear the names of those who have died in the past year, we may find ourselves thinking, “I can’t believe they’re gone,” or “It seems so surreal that they’re not here,” or “I feel their presence still.” That’s our humanity trying to come to terms with mortality.

Hearing today’s names may stir within us other losses, perhaps from long ago. We don’t move on from grief; we move on with it, and it helps us find our way into and through the mystery of what poet Mary Oliver calls “the

cottage of darkness.” (Borrowed from podcaster Nora McInerney)

Saul Bellow once said about the death of a loved one that it “is something like driving through a plate-glass window. You didn’t know it was there until it shattered, and then for years to come you’re picking up the pieces – down to the last glassy splinter.” (Quoted by Lydia Polgreen in *What My Father’s Death Taught Me About Living*, NYTimes, 10/30/22)

No wonder religious traditions want to help us face death. It’s hard work, perplexing work.

The imagination of the writers of Scripture was working overtime when it came to what happens when we die. A recurring image in the Bible which they use about death proposes that it is like going home.

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” the Psalmist says, “...I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” (Psalm 23:4a, 6b)

“In my Father’s house are many rooms,” Jesus says. “If it were not so, would I go to prepare a room for you...” (John 14:2)

“If this earthly tent in which we live is destroyed,” Paul says, “We have a heavenly home, a house not made with human hands...” (II Corinthians 5:1)

Going home. Going home. The metaphor brings comfort to those who grieve.

Last weekend we held a memorial service here for Westminster member Charlie DeVore, whose name is on the list of the saints we will hear in a moment. Charlie grew up in the Twin Cities, and as a kid played the cornet. He took the instrument with him when the US Navy stationed him in the 1950s in Louisiana. There he discovered the joy of New Orleans jazz and played it the rest of his life.

At his memorial service the jazz band's first song drew on the recurring scriptural metaphor for death:

"There's a land that is fairer than day,
And by faith we can see it afar;
For the Father waits over the way
To prepare us a dwelling place there.

In the sweet by and by,
We shall meet on that beautiful shore;
In the sweet by and by,
We shall meet on that beautiful shore.”

New Orleans jazz is famous for its funeral music. At the end of the service a slow walking dirge begins out the church door with the casket, down the street to the cemetery, and then after the burial, the music shifts into high gear, into improvised, dancing, resurrection joy through the streets.

The music introduces life into death, which is the core of the Christian message.

We cannot know what exactly happens at death. As Paul says, “now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we shall see face to face. Now we know only in part; then we will know fully, even as we have been fully known.” (I Corinthians 13:12)

Until it is our time – and our time will come – we trust, and we imagine God’s love in Jesus Christ, the Risen One, carrying us over, through death into life beyond, into the sweet by and by, where we shall meet on that beautiful shore.

Thanks be to God. Amen.