

Aug 4            Through the Valley

Psalm 23

During my series on Messy Families in one sermon we talked about how to deal with the losses we experience in life. We did not discuss how to deal with our own death. Also, we did a class this summer on the gray areas of health care. In that class we asked people to come to terms with the fact that we will all die. It makes a difference in our health care decisions when we focus on quality not quantity in our living. Because of this, I decided that I wanted to spend this week, and next, talking about our death. I hope that you do not see this as being gloomy or pessimistic. It is a reality we all will face. Most of us hope that it won't be any time soon! Today we will examine the reality of walking through the valley of the shadow of death. Next week we will examine living victoriously even and especially when we know we will die.

Death is a regular part of life. We don't know when our death will happen or how it will happen but we know it will happen. How do we live life well, knowing that death is our common end and could come at any time? How can we face each day without fear, but instead with courage and with hope?

Think about our scripture that was shared this morning. It is one of the most beloved in the Bible. Many of us have learned it by heart. It begins by celebrating that God is our good shepherd. Because of this, we are led to green pastures beside still waters, both symbols of blessedness. This is all well and good, but we know that this is not the totality of life. Living is not all about green pastures and still waters. We have challenges and struggles. These are, to use the translation read today, the darkest valleys. And, ultimately, we walk through, to use the King James Version, the valley of the shadow of death. Yet, we are told to not fear. No evil we are facing is stronger than the shepherd. Even in death we are not left alone.

I am going to remind you once more, you are going to die! I hope that this hasn't come as too great a shock to you. We will walk through that valley. What is the Christian view of death and what comes afterwards? Before I answer those questions I need to say, "None of us really know the answers." We have suggestions through scripture of what it might be like, but ultimately it is a mystery. I think about a conversation I had with

my father just a few weeks before he died. He knew that his death was not long off. He had been a minister for many years, conducting many a memorial service and counseling countless others as they dealt with the loss of loved ones. When I asked him if he was afraid to die he said this, "No, I am not afraid but I am curious." When he saw my surprised look he said, "I have talked about heaven for many years and I am curious to see if I got it right." He had great faith and believed in the doctrine of eternal life but he ultimately acknowledged that it is a mystery.

So, from my perspective, what is death? For me it is a door we step through. It is part of the continuum of life. I often say, "I believe I am already living my life eternal. I don't receive it when I die, I just get a new address." Think about when you moved to Sequim and this means most of you, for there are only a handful of pioneers in this congregation. Changing addresses did not completely change your life, you were still you, but things are different here. We don't do things the way we did back wherever we came from. We have a different community ethos. We have new friends. Life is different yet the same.

This seems to be the recurrent theme of much of New Testament thought concerning death. We hear Jesus telling his disciples that he is going to prepare a place for them and, later to the thief, that today he will be with him in paradise. Death is a door to something better. There are some other views concerning death in the New Testament, such as we sleep until the final resurrection, but primarily in Christian faith, death is a door we step through that brings us closer to God, the one we love.

Now we get to the more controversial question. What is on the other side of the door? Views about heaven and hell, forgiveness and judgement, paradise and punishment are wide and varied. From Jesus' words and example we have a few clues regarding what is next. The first of these is that what you do here on earth matters eternally.

We have the parable of the rich man and Lazarus or the parable of the king separating people into sheep and goat categories. To go back to our scripture, Jesus was saying it matters whether or not you are faithfully following the shepherd. Actions matter, especially how you treat others. In both of the parables mentioned, judgment

was heaped upon people for how they ignored the needs of those around them. “What did you do for the least among you?” seems to be the question Jesus says God asks us. Unfortunately, throughout much of Christianity we have changed the “final exam question.” We don’t ask, “Were you a good neighbor?” to quote another parable. Instead, we have asked, “Did you believe such and such?” We have made correct theology more important than compassion. I think that is a very dangerous path to tread when it comes to our life eternal.

Second, Jesus seems to imply that forgiveness is always a possibility. This means that grace is closer to the heart of God than judgement. The thief who, we believe, lived a very wayward life is given paradise because he finally turned to Jesus. Jesus seems to imply that the person who lived a compassionate life, even if not a church person, is closer to the heart of God than the faithful one who ignores the plight of those around him. This is a difficult pill for many in the church to swallow. We want salvation to be about right beliefs, our beliefs. We want to be the one to judge who is saved and who is not. And, for us salvation comes in living and saying and doing faith as we believe it to be done. This has always led to intolerance and persecution. It has led us to appear more like the Pharisee praying at the temple, glad he was not like the miserable tax collector, instead of like that tax collector who realizes that he has messed up but trusts in God’s mercy.

What about hell? Jesus implies that judgement is a possibility. Much of our perception of hell comes from images taken from the Book of Revelation with its pit of fire and more. We don’t take too seriously some of the other images from that book so I wouldn’t rely on it for what hell is like. What Jesus definitely says is that God is in control, God is the judge, God is the shepherd. That is not our role. When we judge, we are trying to take God’s place. We are called to love, to show compassion, and to forgive. We are to live trusting that we will be forgiven as God forgives us.

We have all sorts of questions. Will we see our loved ones again? Will our pets go to heaven? What does heaven look like? Do we have to be afraid of going to hell? What will we do with all eternity? I am sure you can think of lots more questions. The Bible is maddeningly silent on the details of what is on the other side of that door we call

death. It is a mystery and as my father said, "We are all curious to know what it will be like."

Instead of details about eternal life, Jesus invites us into a relationship, one that he says nothing can break, not even death. So we are challenged to follow the good shepherd who wants to lead us to good pastures, to put a feast before us and more. This shepherd promises us that when we walk through dark valleys, and ultimately that valley of death, we will not be alone. To receive all the shepherd has to give us, we are called to live lovingly and compassionately.

I John 4:7-8 is my favorite Bible verse. "Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."

Our God is a God of love who asks us to begin to live right now as we will eternally. We do this by loving others because then we will be preparing our hearts for that great moment when we will greet God face to face and feel the full and overwhelming power of love forgiving us, blessing us, and cleansing us. We don't have to try to figure out who is going to heaven. That is not our role. We are called to love. Our faith is a road map not of theology but of how to love, to follow a shepherd who calls us to love. If we fill our lives with love we will know that presence always, nothing can separate us from that love and we will be embraced in love and hear the great benediction, "Well done good and faithful servant."