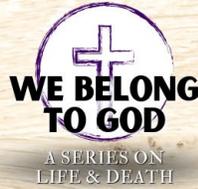


Sunday, March 5
9:00 & 11:00am



*We Belong to
God, Today
and Forever!*



“We Belong to God, Today and Forever!”
March 5, 2023 | Second Sunday in Lent
Clara Thompson | John 3:1-17

In my experience, there are two topics that teenagers are much more comfortable talking about than most adults: Sex, and death. It was not uncommon for me, back in the day when I used to teach the confirmation classes at the First Presbyterian Church in Oregon, WI, to dedicate one evening to: “Everything you always wanted to ask Pastor Clara but never had a chance to ask.” Sex usually came up first, frequently in the form of the question, “Clara, what do you think about premarital sex?” (At this point, one of my sons famously jumped up off the floor from where he was lounging and as he was bolting for the door said, “I’m out of here!” Talking with your pastor about premarital sex was one thing, but when your Mom is the pastor and all of your friends are there?!?!? Not so much.)

Well, Pastor Charlie led a sermon series last winter on “Let’s Talk About Sex” so we’re not going to talk about that this morning. The other topic that, in my personal experience, teenagers are more likely to ask about than adults is this: What happens after we die? This question also came up in confirmation classes just about every year. For youth, who think about death as something way far into the future, their curiosity is piqued. For many of us as adults, we’d rather not talk about it, thank you very much. Well, this morning, we’re going to tackle that very question. What happens after we die?

My father’s parents died when he was young ... his father when he was 7 and his mother when he was 14. My father rarely spoke about that, and rarely talked about his parents. I suspect it was just too painful. But what I do remember is that, when he did talk about it, he almost always said that he was looking forward to “seeing” his parents when he died. That’s the image of heaven that I grew up with: a place where you get to see everyone again. I lived with that image for a long time, until I reached that interesting stage of life when you question just about everything your parents ever told you. So, I thought long and hard about my father’s understanding of heaven and came to my own conclusion,

which in my case was: “Well, that’s ridiculous!” As a young adult I couldn’t buy the idea of a whole lot of people floating around heaven and hanging out together. So, for a long time, my idea of heaven did not include being able to recognize people in heaven.

Fast forward to my late 30’s. By this time my father had been dead for about 9 years, and now my mother was very near her own death. Though my mom had lived in Ann Arbor, MI, where I was raised, for over 40 years, she had moved to Madison after she had a pretty significant stroke in order to be close to my brother and me. She was at the Attic Angel Health Center when it was over on Segoe Road and so I was able to visit her often. In her final weeks, when it was clear that the end of her earthly life was near, my mother would occasionally look up into a corner of her room and start talking to someone ... someone whom she could apparently see, but whom I could not. It was evident from the side of the conversation that I could hear that she was talking to my Dad. She could “see” him when all I saw was the corner of the room where the two walls met the ceiling. Maybe my childhood faith wasn’t so far off after all. Maybe we DO see people in heaven. It sure seemed as if Mom was seeing Dad, and it was very evident that it was giving her a tremendous amount of peace. It also gave me peace, a lot of peace, a lot of comfort, as my understanding of the afterlife shifted again and I thought of Dad, waiting for Mom, in heaven.

At about the same time that I was wrestling with whether Mom would “see” Dad in heaven or not, whether they would be together again, another challenging question started worming its way into my thoughts. Both my husband Paul and I had been married before. Paul was a widower; I was divorced. Paul and Sally had been happily married for 22 years when she died of cancer. Sally is buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia, because Paul is a 20 year veteran of the United States Navy. When Paul dies, he will be buried in the same grave. They will be together. So the challenging, troubling, question for me was: Who will Paul be with in heaven? Will he be married to both of us, or will I as the second wife be left out? For me it came down to that very same question that just about every confirmation class would ask me, “What happens after we die?” I wrestled with that for a long time. I struggled with that. If Paul was at a late school board meeting and I started worrying about his safety on the road, I thought about it. If he was on a business trip and his flight was delayed, I thought about it. I didn’t talk to anyone about it because, well, most adults don’t like to talk about death, or what happens to us after we die.

In Jesus’ day the Sadducees asked him a similar kind of question in the Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. If a woman had had more than one husband, to whom would

she be married in heaven? They put the following question to Jesus: “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife but no child, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. There were seven brothers; the first married and, when he died, left no children; and the second married the widow and died, leaving no children; and the third likewise; none of the seven left children. Last of all, the woman herself died. In the resurrection, whose wife will she be? For the seven had married her.” Mark 12:19-23) Jesus responds by saying that the Sadducees are wrong for they “know neither the scriptures nor the power of God.” (12:24) They missed the point. They were making God too small.

The late Lamar Williamson, Jr, Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies at Union Theological Seminary, and Presbyterian School of Christian Education, wrote in his commentary on Mark’s Gospel, “To think only literally about the resurrection is to be, like the Sadducees, quite mistaken; for, like them, it is to limit the power of God to conditions such as we know them on earth. Speculation about the age of resurrection bodies, the stage of personality development when one is raised from the dead, or the conditions of life after death, misses the point of Jesus’ teaching. Instead of this kind of information, the Lord offers a promise: more life, with God.” (Lamar Williamson, Jr., INTERPRETATION Bible Commentary on Mark, p.224)

What happens after we die? It’s a question that we may not like to talk about, but a question that many of us think about. I finally came to my own conclusion, a conclusion that gives me peace, a conclusion that gives me comfort, a conclusion upon which I can live and die in faith. And this is it: I don’t have a clue what happens after we die. I don’t know if we “see” loved ones or not. I don’t know how old we are in heaven. I don’t know if it’s a black and white “world” in heaven or a technicolor world. But what I do believe, with all my heart, from the bottom of my toes to the top of my head and well beyond, is that the same God who loves me and takes care of me now, will love me and take care of me after I die. I believe to my very core that “in life and in death, we belong to God,” and that nothing, absolutely nothing can take that away from us.

The words of Jesus in our reading for this morning, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16); the words of Jesus, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17); and the words of Paul in Romans 8 are among the biggest rocks of my faith, the boulders at the very bottom that hold the rest of the stones in place. Hear these words from Romans 8. The Apostle Paul writes, “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor

angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

My friends, we all answer the question in our own way. What happens after we die? I share with you the rock, the boulder, upon which my faith and my hope rests: In life and in death, we belong to God. Nothing, and no one, can take that from us ... ever! And so, I do not fear the grave. The same God who loves me now, who watches over me, who sustains me, who gives me the very breath of life, will be there for me after I die. I don't know what it will look like, but I trust. I trust in God's eternal love, today and forever.

Thanks be to God. Amen.