

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, AUGUST 26, 2018

AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH

BETHANY BEACH, DE

A businessman was in a great deal of trouble. His business was failing, he had put everything he had into the business, he owed everybody; it was so bad he was even contemplating suicide. As a last resort he went to a pastor and poured out his story of tears and woe.

When he had finished, the pastor said, "Here's what I want you to do, put a beach chair and your Bible in your car and drive down to the beach. Take the beach chair and the Bible to the water's edge, sit down in the beach chair, and put the Bible in your lap. Open the Bible; the wind will rifle the pages, but finally the open Bible will come to rest on a page. Look down at the page and read the first thing you see. That will be your answer; that will tell you what to do."

A year later the businessman went back to the pastor and brought his wife and children with him. The man was in a new custom-tailored suit, his wife in a mink coat, the children shining. The businessman pulled an envelope stuffed with money out of his pocket and gave it to the pastor as a donation in thanks for his advice.

The pastor recognized the benefactor, and was curious. "You did as I suggested?" he asked.

"Absolutely," replied the businessman.

"You went to the beach?"

"Absolutely."

"You sat in a beach chair with the Bible in your lap?"

"Absolutely."

"You let the pages rifle until they stopped?"

Sometimes God is speaking to us in ways we had not imagined, so it's best that we sit up and listen to see if we discern the Word being passed on to us. We have shifted from bread of God theology finally after six weeks in the *Gospel of John* and are now at a place where some of the disciples and others who heard the "eat- my-flesh-and-drink-my-blood" treatise find it more than they can bear and decide to move on; they don't trust the words or the actions of Jesus at this point and start to explore other options. Jesus looks at Peter as if to say "will you go, too?" but Peter responds "where would we go, Lord? After all, you have the words of eternal life." Perhaps he says it with a bit of snark. Peter already knows too much to leave himself. It's as if he is saying to Jesus you aren't what we were expecting as Messiah, but that is okay; you're much more than we were hoping for.

What is that was so offensive to those who decided to leave? He does ask those who are listening to eat his flesh, but he is never sure they understand the metaphor of it. Part of the problem is that Jesus both intends the allegory and does not at the same moment. He wants to see how far folks are willing to go with him, and he does take them to the very edge of meaning. Perhaps some of his followers understand that they will have to die the death he is going to die; they can see what his words foreshadow, and that scares them. But the majority (including Judas, you'll note) stay, because as Peter says they would not know what to do and where to go otherwise. And because as this entire chapter has taught us, we are spiritually hungry, we too go along for the ride, trusting in God to take us where our life needs to find itself so that we might live eternally as has been promised.

So, what does it mean to live eternally? Are we not on part of that journey now? The folks I spoke to you about last week upon whom I laid my hands - - what part of the journey were they on? Or is the phrase itself just a metaphor of all life with Jesus? Is it something we even desire? I think to answer the question we need a clearer idea of what it entails.

First, eternal life can be thought of as “something that Christians experience *now*. Believers don’t have to ‘wait’ for eternal life, because it’s not something that starts when they die. Rather, eternal life begins the moment a person exercises faith in Christ. It is our current possession. The focus of eternal life is not on our future, but on our current standing in Christ.ⁱⁱ I’m not sure I ever have thought of it in the present tense, but if one takes it on from this perspective, the results are outstanding. We can life in eternal life now. This does not mean there is no future existence.

Everyone who seeks out and claims Christ as their own has eternal life. So, it is available to all of us, not just long-time believers. This is a viewpoint that is unique to *John* and we are presented with it and read it as a kind of corrective to the notions found in the other gospels and the epistles that see it as a post-death experience. We all know what happens to the body at death; but I know we are curious as to what happens to the mind, the soul, the spirit, the “other essence.” So too were the people of Jesus’ day, and Jesus’ words and thought processes must have greatly intrigued them.

What happens to our soul when our body dies? Do we begin a new life with Jesus the minute we close our eyes at the end of life? According to coldcasechristianity.com, “Those who accept God’s offer of salvation will be united with God immediately.

There is good reason to believe our afterlife experience begins the minute we close our eyes for the last time here on earth. For those of us who are believers, the instant our earthly bodies die our souls will be united with Jesus in the afterlife:ⁱⁱⁱ

Those who have accepted God's offer of Salvation will be with Jesus in what we commonly refer to as "Heaven." But our experience in Heaven prior to the earthly return of Jesus (and the resurrection of our bodies), while much better than our life here on earth, will *not* be complete. It will only be *part* of the experience we will one day have when Jesus returns to earth and resurrects the bodies of those who are already with Him in spirit. While He's at it, He'll bring those of us who are still alive home as well.^{iv} This is the most common theological understanding of what is to take place, but it is not the only one, as I mentioned. To be certain, we simply do not know what happens when we die, since there has only been one true experience of a resurrection to tell us of it, and much of that story may, like so much of the gospel, be purely allegorical.

Of course there have been those who have had NDE's (or Near Death Experiences). Many of their stories relate the sensation of floating up and viewing the scene around one's unconscious body; spending time in a beautiful, otherworldly realm; meeting spiritual beings (some call them angels) and a loving presence that some call God; encountering long-lost relatives or friends; recalling scenes from one's life; feeling a sense of connectedness to all creation as well as a sense of overwhelming, transcendent love; and finally being called, reluctantly, away from the magical realm and back into one's own body. Many NDErs report that their experience did not feel like a dream or a hallucination but was, as

they often describe it, “more real than real life.” They are profoundly changed afterward, and tend to have trouble fitting back into everyday life. Some embark on radical career shifts. I’ve never met anyone who has had an NDE (have you?) but those I’ve read about mostly seem credible. It just goes to show you that there are a variety of experiences when it comes to our understanding and beliefs about the afterlife. Are we therefore forced to pick and choose? Like anything, we need to do our own research. Hopefully I’ve given you some food for thought this morning.

The context for this morning’s gospel lesson is, as it has been these past five weeks, the celebration of the holy communion in our weekly services. In this morning’s text, one realizes that there is something unique about the disciples who stay, and it might offer a clue as to why we stay, why we believe, why we carry on in our faith journey. Take Peter, for instance. Theologian David Lose tell us “Peter, you see, knew where to look. That’s it. That’s what makes him and the others different – it’s not their brains or the ability or their status or even their faith: they simply know where to look.

And once again, you see, we find ourselves all of a sudden right back in the middle of our discussion about the sacraments and the significance they hold for our life together. For as Jesus’ real presence in our world, the sacraments are the one place we may look and know for sure that we will find God in Christ....Now here I want to be most clear. This is not to say that God is not at work in other places in the world. As believing Christians we confess that this world simply pulses with the presence and activity of its creator: in nature, of course, but also in government, and family, in the work you do and the benefits you receive from the work of others, in our gathering together as families and as a family of

faith. In all these places and more God continues to be both present and active creating and sustaining the whole creation. And yet...and yet each of us knows just how difficult at times it can be to see God in these places. When nature turns violent or government goes corrupt, when the family is a place of discord and the church one of division, when all the things we usually count on come up empty and we no longer know where to turn, then we may hear the sacraments calling us back to see God clearly at work for us through water, bread, and wine, combined with God's mighty word of forgiveness, acceptance, and life."^{vi} Bread, wine and water - - our spiritual staples, the essence of Divine Wisdom, surface when we most need them; "this is probably why more and more churches from a variety of traditions have moved in recent decades to more frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper, recognizing that week in and week out, in the midst of all the craziness and haziness of life in our world, it's incredibly helpful to come to church and count on having the elements of bread and wine lifted into the air that we might see and taste God's particular promises of acceptance, forgiveness, and presence for us"^{vii} to remind us of God's presence with us and that the playing field, especially for hope and healing, is much greater than we ever noticed. That should be for us a joy and a comfort as we face our own daily deaths and our subsequent resurrections.

God, the elements, the Divine Wisdom are all available to us daily. We need only look heavenward in our prayers and inward in our thoughts, and we can, literally, have it all.

Amen.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.
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ⁱ http://jokes.christiansunite.com/Faith/Divine_Advice.shtml

ⁱⁱ <https://www.gotquestions.org/what-is-eternal-life.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Wallace, J. Warner@<http://coldcasechristianity.com/2018/what-happens-to-our-souls-when-we-die/>

^{iv} *ibid.*

^v <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/04/the-science-of-near-death-experiences/386231/>

^{vi} <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/08/pentecost-13-b/>

^{vii} *ibid.*