

Look At The New Life In You

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the seventh Sunday in ordinary time, February 22, 1998. Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Each year I receive a complimentary date book that fits in my shirt pocket. On every page the seven days of the week are divided by heavy black lines. Each space between the heavy black lines represents one day in my life, and the heavy black lines separating the days remind me of the nights that divide my days. I have a stack of these date books going back twenty years. I fill the spaces with reminders to visit the hospital, to prepare sermons, to attend session meetings, pick up the boys at school, to go on vacation. I also fill the spaces with unwritten things like praying, reading, cleaning the house, watching basketball games and sleeping. I live one space at a time. A life insurance agent can roughly guess how many more of these date books I'm going to need - five, ten and a half, twenty? Maybe this one will be the last one I'll need. But one day, no matter what I've planned, I'll get to the last space that I'll ever use in my date book (Smedes).

I have a rendezvous with death. (Alan Seeger)

I've asked myself over the years what happens after I get to that last space. What will happen when I die? Sometimes the thought of death frightens me. We hear the classic expression of that fear of death in Hamlet's soliloquy where he speaks of..

... the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveler returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?

I have two sorts of fears when I think of my own death and I've heard these fears expressed by other people as well. The first is the fear of my own personal extinction; the fear that when I die that will be the end of me. There's a well known letter written by Dr. Thomas H. Huxley, the great English agnostic, who was born in 1825 and died in 1895, a letter that he wrote to a friend around 1880. "It comes over me with a kind of horror that I shall know no more in

1900 about what's going on than I did in 1800. I would much rather be in hell, at least in the upper circles where the company and the climate are not too trying" (as quoted by Dr. Norman V. Hope, in his sermon *The Christian Attitude Towards Death*). Jim Morrison of the Doors said something similar,

This is the end,
Beautiful friend,
This is the end,
My only friend,
The end of our elaborate plans,
The end of everything that stands,
The end. No safety or surprise,
The end. I'll never look into your eyes
Again.

The fear that death is the end, that it means extinction, is a very real fear in 20th century America.

The second fear I sometimes have is the fear of hell. Jesus spoke of the "outer darkness" where there's "weeping and gnashing of teeth." The Revelation of St. John spoke of "a lake of fire burning with brimstone." Without a doubt, this is symbolic language and not to be taken literally. But it's symbolic of a reality that we should not ignore. Karl Barth speaks of hell sometimes as "the impossible possibility" and other times as "the possible impossibility." Given the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and his love for sinners Barth can't understand how anybody can go to hell. But he acknowledges that prophets and apostles warn that when we willfully and persistently turn and walk away from God and our neighbors we may get what we want - loneliness and the absence of God who is the source of all joy and peace and love. James Boswell tells us in his life of Samuel Johnson that Dr. Johnson often expressed his fear of going to hell. His friends tried to comfort him by speaking of the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. But Dr. Johnson would say, "Yes! I know that! But I also know that Jesus said that he would put some people on his left hand and say to them, 'Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire.'"

So there's the fear of personal extinction and there's the fear of hell. But a Christian faces these fears courageously. Someone has said that courage is not the absence of fear. Rather courage is acting faithfully in spite of our fears. The Christian acts faithfully in the face of the

fear of death by refusing to let those fears paralyze us. We act in faith. We embrace the hope of the Gospel. We believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. We say that every week in the Apostles' Creed. Week after week we repeat the same thing because we need to get it into our heads and down into our hearts that death does not mean extinction nor need we fear hell. We believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

St. Paul writes,

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? ... For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.

The Christian hope is that when we get to the last space allotted to us in our date books and those date books will no longer be any good to us God will give us a new date book and a whole new life. God will raise us from the dead. We'll die and our death will be real. But God will raise us from the dead. That must be carefully understood because it doesn't mean that the body that's laid in the tomb or cremated will be reconstituted or resuscitated or reanimated. It will decompose into the dust. Nevertheless the Christian faith proclaims that God will give us a new body. St. Paul tells us that the body that we bury is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. The dead will be raised imperishable.

Our belief in the resurrection of our bodies is an affirmation of God's concern for the whole person, body and soul. One of the best illustrations of the Christian hope in the resurrection of the body was expressed by Benjamin Franklin in an epitaph he wrote for his own tombstone (although not used):

REVISED EDITION
The Body
of
Benjamin Franklin, Printer
(Like the cover of an old book,
Its contents torn out,
And stripped of its lettering and gilding,)
Lies here food for worms.
Yet the work itself shall not be lost,

For it will (as he believes) appear once
more
In a new
And beautiful Edition
Corrected and Amended
By
The Author

When this date book of mine is no longer needed by me, the One who raised Jesus from
the dead will present me with a new and beautiful edition ^{OF MY BODY} with the promise of eternal life. There
are times in my life when I've really felt alive. Whatever else the resurrection of the body means
it means that we will really be alive, more alive than any of us have ever been before. When our
loved ones in Christ die it's the end of their story *for us*. But *for them* it will be the beginning of
a new story. Our life in this world is only the cover and the title page. The last space we use in
our date books will be the first page in the first chapter of our continuing story which no one on
earth can read: a story which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one
before (C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, ch. 16). "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable,
always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in
vain."

Teach us, O Lord, to live as those who are about to die and to die as those who are about to live that whether we live
or die it may be unto you who are the Lord of life and death. We pray this in the name of the resurrected Christ and
for his sake. Amen.