

Hope in Death
May 5, 2013
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
Rev. John Cleghorn

Scripture: Psalm 103:15; 1 Corinthians 15:51-58

The longer I live, the more I realize that life is lived in the balance.

In matters of money and material things, contentment rests between having too little and too much. In matters of politics and economics, wisdom usually resides somewhere in the middle between one end of liberalism and the other end of conservatism. In our social lives, we need a few good friends rather than a lot of fair-weather ones. In both big decisions and little ones, it's usually best if we can balance our head with our heart, our intellect with our emotions.

Successful couples are usually those whose attributes offset and whose strengths complement. Even life together in the church is lived out between the already and the not yet, between memory of what God has done and the promise of what God will do.

Perhaps the greatest balancing act of all, though, relates to how we think about life itself, in that we should take it seriously, but not too much so.

But this truth about balance doesn't apply just to our understanding of life. It applies to our understanding of death, as well. In thinking about the end of life, it seems to me that we should take death seriously, but not too much so.

After all, that is what distinguishes us as Christians. In the range of other world religions and belief systems, the end of this life is either, just that, the end, nothing more. Or this life is just one phase of much longer cycle, the very existence of which means that this life is well, just *a* life, perhaps one of many. As has been said, then, from the perspective of many Christians, other religions risk being either too pessimistic about death or they risk being too optimistic about it. But as Easter people, we Christians are called to live in the balance.

We are talking about death today – and again next Sunday - because of a great idea from our Congregational Care Committee. Elder Ruth Curtis and her team are inviting us to plan our funeral or memorial service, whichever term you choose.

There are plenty of reasons to think ahead. As those who comfort families as they prepare and experience that final remembrance of a lost loved one, our Congregational Care team knows how helpful it is when things have been planned and final wishes made known. So the practical reasons for such planning are many.

But it is, of course, much more than a practical issue. It is a matter of faith. It is impossible to think, really think, about the end of life and NOT think about what comes next. Here at Caldwell, we think of a funeral or memorial service as an occasion to bear witness to the resurrection. Memorial services here have taken various forms. But it is always a time of both mourning and

celebrating a life lived under the promise of resurrection. Yes, like life itself, we should take a balanced view of death.

I can tell you without hesitation that the privilege of helping plan and conduct a memorial service is one of the greatest honors and, yes, joys of ministry. There is no joy in death – that is not what I mean. But it can be a time of joyous remembrance and the beginning of healing when a life is aptly and characteristically put in perspective through song and scripture, reflection and prayer and, yes, even laughter.

Last week I wrote in my blog that churches often don't focus enough on the end of life. Many of you wrote back in strong agreement. Several of you also did me the favor of sharing your own thoughts and questions.

One member, who has lost both parents, cited the sober feeling of “being next in the queue.” One of you confessed a fear of her end of life being a prolonged dementia or time on life support; she called it a “long, lingering, unaware time before death.”

Another focused on providing comfort to her survivors.

“High church is not on my agenda when I die. However, favorite scriptures and hymns, songs that brought me comfort in life should bring comfort to those who remain after me.”

Perhaps no one has done as much to consider the end of life and what comes next as member Linda Matney. After the death of her husband Jack, Linda compiled more than 100 essays in a book entitled "Imagining Heaven." It was, she wrote, "conceived through my own heavenly envisioning of reuniting with Jack someday... offered to "promote thought and conversation about" what she calls "the greatest unknown human beings face ... and perhaps even transform the fear of death so many of us experience into anticipation."

Linda has generously provided a number of copies of her book on the table at the back of the sanctuary for anyone who would like one. And we will soon invite her to do a talk on what she learned about life and death through this book.

Finally in response to my request this week for thoughts about the end of life came this profound response from one member.

“Sometimes I pretend to be an alien from another dimension and I think, "How can a human creature possibly live, really live, knowing that death is imminent and permanent at any moment?" And then I usually answer the alien with, "Hey, a margarita would taste great right now!"

Sounds like the doctrine of that great theologian, Jimmy Buffet.

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Holy scripture, of course, has its own things to say about living and dying and what comes next. In scripture we find that balanced view of life and death.

Accounts of death in the Old Testament, especially in the Pentateuch, reflect how God's people viewed death as simply the natural end of life. We read how great leaders such as Abraham breathed their last and died in a "good old age, full of years." You see, the Israelites were surrounded by pagan theories of the afterlife, yet clung fiercely to a conviction that life was finite. When it was over, that was it.

We hear that in our Old Testament reading from Psalm 103. This psalm is a favorite of many for how it praises God's thorough involvement in this life. God forgives, heals, redeems, crowns and satisfies. These expressions of God's abiding love and steadfast faithfulness contrast with the more transitory and unreliable aspects of human nature. Thus we hear Psalm 103's only comment on human existence in verse 15.

"As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower in the field; for the wind passes over it and it is gone."

As you can hear, this Old Testament view of life and death isn't exactly draped in emotion and sentimentality. But this is not scripture's last word on the subject. The sweep of the New Testament tells us that death is not the end and that we can have confidence in hope, all in and through Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul grew to be well practiced in making that very argument. Time and again, as he helped organize and direct new believing communities, he encountered the old beliefs of Judaism that all ended in the grave. He also ran into his fair share of other theories that our souls lived on in some realm based loosely on what we see around us.

So, in the 15th chapter of 1 Corinthians and other passages, Paul felt compelled to explain what he thought resurrection meant and didn't mean. For Paul, the risk was that believers then – and now – would underestimate God's victory over death in Christ. That victory was not just over the physical world. It was not simply a matter of freeing our souls from our physical bodies. No, that was not it at all.

For Paul, life ended in death. After all, if death is not real, then what did Christ's victory over death really amount to? No, for Paul, resurrection is not just another word for resuscitation or even rebirth. It was nothing short of re-creation. To confess that death was "swallowed up" in Christ's victory is to acknowledge that the God who created this world out of nothing recreates us in Christ ... in ways we cannot begin to conceive.

So, even ideas such as our achieving immortality fall short because they assume some kind of imagined existence that is an extension or even an echo of what we see in this world. No, as one commentator says, resurrection is a "second, new creation, quite as inconceivable as the first."[\[1\]](#)

So, what other word could Paul use than to describe it all as a "mystery?"

“Listen, I will tell you a mystery. We will not all die, but we will all be changed.... The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

“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.”

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So, where does all of that leave us as we try to find a balanced view of life and death, one that takes life and death seriously but not too much so?

Reinhold Niebhur was a great 20th century theologian. He offered this perspective:

“It is unwise for Christians to claim any knowledge of either the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell.”[\[2\]](#)

I don't think Niebhur would frown on our inclination to try to imagine what comes after death. It is only natural to want to picture our loved ones in a place of peace and to hope that we will see them again. I think Niebhur simply meant that we should not put too much stock in our imaginations because they are vastly limited compared to our God's capacity for recreation once our lives on this mortal plane are done.

In that sense, we can have hope in death. We hope even in death because we have been adopted by a God who reigns over this creation and the next and whose mercies are everlasting.

Yes, it is only human nature to consider the "what," "when" and "where" of our resurrection. But what we can take most assurance from is something different. It is the "who" and "whose" of our lives, the promise of our adoption in Christ, that answers all of our questions about the end of life. The rest will take care of itself.

And “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!”[\[3\]](#)

“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.”

Amen and amen.