I Corinthians 15:35-45, II Corinthians 4:16-5:1

Our scripture passages for today, as we come to the end of a series of sermons I’ve been preaching on the Apostle’s Creed, both come from the hand of the Apostle Paul. The first is from I Corinthians 15, beginning with the 35th verse. Listen as Paul describes his understanding of the resurrection of the body.

But someone will ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?’ Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory.

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, ‘The first man, Adam, became a living being’; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.

Our second reading is from Paul’s second letter to the church at Corinth, beginning with the 4th chapter and the 16th verse. Listen for what the Apostle Paul says about what he calls “this slight momentary affliction.”

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

One short week ago, just in time for this sermon (thank you, God!) the brilliant theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking came out with a statement about life after death. Speaking at the Cambridge Film Festival where a film about his life was premiering, Hawking said, “I think the brain is like a program in the mind which is like a computer. So it’s theoretically possible to copy the brain on to a computer and so provide a form of life after death.”
He acknowledged that such a feat lies “beyond our present capabilities” and hastened to add that he thinks that the conventional afterlife is a “fairytale for people afraid of the dark. There is no afterlife for broken down computers.”

With all due respect to Hawking, and he is due an enormous amount of respect, I think rejecting any notion of eternal life, any embrace of life everlasting that goes beyond what we somehow create with our own brains and hands, takes both a tremendous amount of flat-out hubris and an epic failure of imagination.

Oh, I understand why Hawking might reject the “conventional afterlife” particularly if he was raised with the sort of image of God Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz Weber says that she was raised with. In her new memoir, she writes that in her childhood she was given the image of angry God “with a killer surveillance system who had to send his little boy, and he only had one, to suffer and die because I was bad. But the good news was that if I believed this story and then tried really hard to be good, when I died, I would go to heaven, where I would live in a golden gated community with God and all the other people who believed and did the same things as I did.”

Bolz-Weber used to joke that when she was estranged from her conservative Christian parents, her mom would say, in her slight Kentucky accent “Nadia, the least you could do is come visit us more often, since we won’t be spending eternity together.”

She wondered if her parents understood “That spending eternity with them and their friends was not exactly their church's best selling point.” She points out that this view of eternity and how one gets there “portrays God as just as mean and selfish as we are, which feels a little like it has more to do with our own greed and spite than it has to do with God.”

Indeed. And that’s worth really thinking about. But maybe there are more choices when it comes to what to believe about eternal life than broadly drawn caricatures or broken down computers.

The Apostles’ Creed ends with a declaration that we believe in the life everlasting (and before that, the resurrection of the body). I think we tend to think most about those affirmations when we are brought face to face with mortality, our own or someone else’s. When someone you love is at death’s door, when you’re by their bedside and you see the life depart their body, when we stand before a casket in a funeral home or pay our respects to a loved one in a memorial service. That’s when we can’t avoid the fact, and it is a fact, that bodies give out. That’s when the question of everlasting life becomes more than just an interesting topic to reflect upon someday. It becomes pressing.

The Apostle Paul knew well the limitations of living in a human body. Bodies grow older, parts wear out. I had an older friend once who was fond of talking about how he was full of replacement parts. He said he was like the bionic man. The warranty had expired on his original parts, he said.

The Apostle Paul was thinking about that when he said even though the outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day after day. Paul wanted to say that there’s something more to us than just biology and chemistry, as important as those things are. Paul wanted to say that there is something deeply spiritual about life and though we may be going through difficulty, some slight momentary affliction, that’s just preparing us for something more.
Then he compared our earthly bodies to tents. A few weeks ago, when I was back in North Carolina for my former congregation’s Homecoming I had a chance to visit with one of the young women who cared for our children as a Sunday School teacher and as a youth leader. She’s now gotten married to a guy who really likes to go camping. I don’t think of Jennie as the camping sort. In his presence, she told me all about a big trip they took this past spring that involved a lot of camping as they headed up into the Northeast, and she shared that they did some camping in the rain. Her husband Keith said, “No, Jennie that wasn’t camping in the rain. That was camping in drizzle. You haven’t experienced camping in the rain yet. That’s when the water comes up and it gets in your tent, and the flaps leak. That’s camping in the rain.” Keith said.

One way to look at our bodies is that they are like tents that house our spirits for a time. And these tents that we inhabit, they spring leaks, they get battered by the elements and eventually they wear out—but they are just temporary dwellings for us. Paul puts it this way, if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed; we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. In other words, life everlasting.

For me, the affirmation of a life everlasting means way more than, in the words of the old spiritual, “I gotta home up inna that kingdom, ain’t that good news?”

It means that I am more than just a body with a brain. It means that there is an enduring significance to human lives that goes beyond the days we are manifest on this earth. For me, to believe in the life everlasting puts my life here on Earth and the irritants and stressors, the big things that can seem like they matter so much, the small problems that can seem so huge, into perspective.

For me to believe in life everlasting, well it causes me, when I stop and think about it, when I actually pause and think about it, to ask questions like this: What difference is this going to make five years from now? Ten years from now? A hundred years from now? What difference will what I’m stressing about make in light of eternity? And importantly, what are the ripple effects of the decisions I’m making now? What are the ripple effects of the energy I’m putting out right now? What are the ripple effects of the kindness, the patience, the gratitude that I put out? How will they affect people around me? How will they affect generations to come? What are the ripple effects of the anxiety and fear that I’m putting out? How will they affect the people around me? How will they affect generations to come?

You see, when I think about eternity, and realize that I’m living just a tiny sliver of it, well; it puts a brand new perspective on things. It means that maybe there are things I am here to learn and do. That this life might be a training ground. That this slight momentary affliction, whatever it happens to be, might be preparing you and me for an eternal weight of glory.

For me, believing in life everlasting is not about getting goodies when I die as a reward for putting down the right answer on the final exam, invoking the correct formula, or somehow doing enough good to merit entrance into a golden gated community. For me, believing in life everlasting is about trusting that there is something larger at work in me and in the world than just what I experience temporally.

The Greeks had two words for time. You may know this, should know this. Chronos, from which we get the word chronological, that’s the time that just marches on as year succeeds to year. And they associated it with the god Chronos who, you may remember, ate his children. Time passes
on. As Johnny Mercer wrote in his lovely song, “The days of wine and roses laugh and run away like a child at play through a meadowland toward a closing door, a door marked nevermore that wasn’t there before.” ii

Mercer is naming the truth that our bodies give out, that time does pass and things do come to an end. What that lovely, lovely song is, well, it’s a hymn to Chronos.

The Greeks had another word for time, divine time, and that word was Kairos. Kairos was a word for the truth that there are moments when time seems to stop. There are moments when it seems like eternity breaks into the present. Times when we recognize that there’s more to life than just temporality, there are things that matter beyond just what is physical.

If we are open to them, they happen all the time. You’ll be sitting at lunch with a friend, and no matter how long it’s been since you’ve seen them last, it’s as if no time has passed. You share thoughts and the discussion leads to new insights, and it’s as if heaven itself has broken open. Someone stands up in worship with a concern, or a celebration and the community’s hearts gather around this person. A loved one has a birthday, and you are grateful, as I am this morning, with just how much you appreciate her and the fact that God put her in your life. It’s Judith’s birthday today.

There’s Chronos time and there is Kairos time, and Kairos time is when it strikes us again that there is something larger at work in the world than just what our tiny imaginations can fathom.

So what difference does the affirmation of life everlasting make for you and me? That’s a question we’ve got to answer.

For me the issue is not all of the conjecture about exactly what an afterlife is going to look like, and how soon we experience it. Are there going to be streets of gold? Will we go right away like the thief whom Jesus tells “Today you will be with me in Paradise?” Or do we somehow have to wait until the end of time as some of Paul’s writings suggest. Will I be able to recognize all of the deceased people that I want to see?

I don’t have the answers to those questions, and the Bible does not speak with one clear voice on them. What I do know is that God’s got that. And God’s got you. And God’s got me.

I don’t know what the future holds, but I know who holds the future. And that means that this life is very, very important. And I don’t need to be anxious about the next.

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