

Where are you going?

Job 19.23-27a; 2 Thess 2.13 - 3.5; Ps 17; Lk 20.27-38

The Rev. Dr. L. Gregory Bloomquist
Saint John's Episcopal Church (Massena NY)
November 11, 2001
Pentecost 23, Year C

Where are you going? No, I don't mean where are you going right now, because I assume that you are going to stay to hear what I have to say. But, if I were to ask you where you are going, you might think about going to get groceries, or going to church, or going to school, or going to work.

And, if I were to ask you how are you going to get there? You could probably tell me.

What about your life? Where is your life going? Where are you headed in your life? And, how are you going to get there?

For many people, the answer is very simple: there is no life after death; there's just this life, and so we have to live it to the fullest. For these people, their well-being and the well-being of people around them is everything, literally. They put an incredible premium on being healthy, on having a good income, on living a satisfying life.

People who live this kind of life express these concerns in a variety of ways. All their focus is on staying well or surrounding themselves with possessions. In the extreme, these people are fearful of everything that might cause them ill-health or loss of money. They may not be like Howard Hughes, they run around with face-masks to keep from getting sick and paranoid about losing any of their millions or just hundreds of dollars, but they do have the same kind of internal turmoil. Some of them are rugged, extreme sports people who want to embrace all the extremes of life at its most dangerous. Most teens fall into this category: they don't think about death and they certainly don't think about resurrection: I mean, why would they, unless something had happened to make them think about it.

These are the kind of people that the Sadducees were. They believed that everything that we could hope for and enjoy was right in this world and it was here now, or we could make it happen in this world.

Now, the Sadducees believed this because they only used the first 5 books of the Bible as their Holy Bible, and since there is no mention of resurrection in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, or Deuteronomy, they said: well, then, there is no resurrection. But, believe it or not, there are some people who Sunday after Sunday proclaim the resurrection and yet fall into this category. Oh, if you were to ask some of these people today what their hope is in life, they might tell you that they believe in the resurrection. They might in fact go to church and proclaim the resurrection of the dead. But, when it comes to living their life, they live their life like Sadducees, like Howard Hughes, and like all those others who think that death is the end, that the best that you can hope for is that after you're gone, your family will survive, or, in the case of the Sadducees, that your people will survive. Death is to be avoided at all costs.

On the other side of such people, are those who embrace death, because it is a door to true life. We have heard a lot -- perhaps more than we ever wanted to hear, or certainly thought we would hear -- about people for whom this life is a kind of hell from which death affords an escape to a real, and unending life.

Usually, but not always, that real and unending life is viewed in very graphic, physical terms as a kind of life that they have been denied here, a life of joy as opposed to a life of sorrow. Not surprisingly, someone in the position of a Job might be attracted to this kind of promise. Someone who felt that his life was so rotten, so consumed by sickness, or by vice, or by evil agents of Satan, might be attracted to this view point. If they were also convinced that this new life was only for select individuals -- 144,000 saints or a martyr-band, people who would be just like them, no strangers, no foreigners, only my kind of people -- then they would be all the more inclined not only to look forward to such a real life but also to embrace it and perhaps to hasten it on. Not surprisingly, they would be inclined to do so on the backs of those people who were going to hell anyway. These people, who are condemned anyway, make perfect stepping stones to my heaven.

People who hold such a view were the people that the Sadducees had in mind when they came to Jesus with this story about a woman who gets married off -- poor thing -- to one brother after another, and the question is then raised: whose woman will she be for eternity? Jesus answers them the same way he might answer either the person who thinks that heaven is some sort of paradise where virgins abound for like-minded martyrs or where heaven is some sort of place where you will be reunited to your spouse and live for all eternity the marriage that you had here. That is not what it is like on the other side of death.

Don't get me wrong. Each of these views of life after death has something to commend it. There does appear sometimes to be nothing on the other side of death, and, if that is so, then let's live to the fullest here and now, regardless of the cost, and make the most of it. There are, also, times and places where things are so bad that death appears like a door to something that must be much better than anything that we have ever experienced here, surrounded by evil and evil people who are different from me.

But, as Christians we believe that our Lord's words concerning life after death are true, and they are, I suggest to you, the words of life. Because, as opposed to those who would suggest that this life is all that there is and there is nothing more or that this life is a worm's life and I want to fly away from it all, our Lord encourages us to see all of life, this life and the life to come, as good, as part of the benevolent goodness of God, extended freely and graciously toward all. It is a goodness that neither ends with death nor begins with death; it is a goodness that continues from this life into the life to come, transformed only in degree. It is a life that here and now experiences goodness from the hand of God, and it is a life that will continue in the life to come as we experience goodness from God himself in the same way that the angels now experience God's goodness. Because that's what life is all about, according to Jesus: experiencing the goodness of God and rejoicing in it, now as a gift, then in God's very presence.

Let me put it this way: do you think that a baby in the womb experiences the goodness of her mother, and of a loving father? Of course, through nourishment, through care, through loving touches, through soft music, through a body kept like a temple. Do you think that little baby is alive? Of course she is. But, that environment in which she finds herself is constricted, restricted in movement, environment, sounds, food... One day, that little child will be born into a world that is unrestricted and unconfined. It will not be easy. I have witnessed 4 births to my wife, and while there is great joy, there are tears, there is suffering. But, the joy on the other side is worth it all. And when that little baby is born, she will not be alive for the first time, and she certainly won't have died; she will be alive in a new way, able to see and move and take in things that will overwhelm her. Have you ever watched a baby's first eye movements as he starts to take it all in.

Well, that's what resurrection is like in our Lord's world, opening our eyes in an unrestricted and unconfined world of continuing care and love. Not an end, not life for the first time, but life in a new way, in a new measure, with a whole new realm of possibilities before us.

May I ask you this week to think seriously about where you are going and how you are going to get there?

Do you really believe that your life will end at death? Then, live life to the fullest, but also ask yourself whether you really think that that is true. Look around you at the faces of people who believe that they are headed toward death as their final destination and see the fear that lies in the back of their eyes. Look around at the faces of the people who know that their life will continue in the good hands of a loving God: what do you see in their eyes?

Do you really believe that this life is so bad that only death can solve your problems, and you will get them no matter who you take with you? Please: take a moment to look around and look into the faces of God's good creation and think again.

But, if you think that this life is a gift from God and that life after death is a transformation of that gift into something even greater, then you have picked up something of what Jesus was talking about. And this is the confidence that will sustain us all through the difficult and troubling times that might lie before us.

"And, to God be the glory, great things He hath done", because it is through Jesus, the door, who gave himself unto death that we might live, that we can experience this continued life, as the sons and daughters of God, from one birth to yet another, even finer birth. That's where the children of God are going.