

Almost a year ago, on the first Sunday of September 2019, I launched us upon a new series of sermons, an alternate lectionary from a book called We Make the Road by Walking, by Brian McLaren. Today I'm preaching from the last chapter in that book and I thought it was appropriate to take a minute or two to reflect on that journey. In part, I started this series because I wanted a fresh approach. After preaching four times through the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary and spending two years in Timothy Matthew Slemmons' experimental Year D lectionary, I wanted to follow a format that would bring us new scriptures to look at, or at least a new take on familiar ones. As you know, I've not been slavish in following the program laid out in We Make the Road by Walking. Some weeks, I've used the scriptures suggested by Rev. McLaren but pursued themes different from the ones he suggests. Some weeks, he's inspired me thematically, but I've chosen different passages to explore. And, of course, some weeks the other preachers in our congregation and association have brought their own messages to you, based on scripture readings of their choice.

On the whole, I've enjoyed this journey and I hope you have, too. I have found Brian McLaren's work sympathetic with my own thought for some years. Like me, he came from a more conservative evangelical background only to find that the answers provided by that tradition weren't answering his questions as the twentieth century waned and gave way to the twenty-first. Unlike me, he was already a pastor when he began groping his way toward a more progressive theology and emergent church style. So, while I was pretty far down that road by the time you all called me to your pastorate, he had to work out his changes while teaching and caring for a whole congregation of souls. I'm sure they needed prayer during those times as much as he did. But if you remember nothing else from my past year of preaching, I hope you'll remember Brian McLaren's name and the fact that he has written a score of fine books that can help Christians who are struggling to put new wine into old wineskins.

In two weeks, after a brief time away, I'm going to get really bold and start yet another new journey with you, but this time without a net. I've gone through my records about what scriptures I've used as topics for sermons and I'm going to set about filling in some of the gaps. There are many places, even in the Gospels, where whole chapters have gone untouched by any of the lectionary lists. In fact, there are some entire books of the Old Testament unrepresented. So, in September, I'll pick up with some pericopes in the Gospel According to Matthew we've not visited and interweave those with passages from the Old Testament books of Nahum, Ezra, and Obadiah, until we reach Advent. Beyond that, I cannot yet say.

Of course, the future is impossible to predict with any accuracy and that fact leads us rather nicely to the theme of Brian McLaren's last chapter and the writings of Paul with which he leaves his readers. Paul, as you heard a few moments ago, is thinking very hard about the future on behalf of his old friends in Corinth and the friends he hopes to make in Rome. That's not uncommon for Paul, nor indeed for Christians or, for that matter, humankind in general. Once relieved from the grinding labor necessary to keep body and soul together, human beings will inevitably look up and around them and say, "Hey, this is good!" And just as inevitably, we will then quickly say, "But what's next?" and that with some trepidation. When we come face to face with the reality of human mortality, and especially our own, our thoughts will turn to what, if anything, comes after. And that question can be frightening. My favorite play from my favorite playwright gives these words to the young Prince of Denmark: "For in that sleep of death what

dreams may come, / When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, Must give us pause... / Who would fardels bear, / To grunt and sweat under a weary life, / But that the dread of something after death, / The undiscover'd 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?"

The “undiscovered country” of death, the death of individuals as well as the so-called “end times,” is something Paul’s correspondents must have asked him about a great deal. What scholars believe is Paul’s earliest surviving letter, First Thessalonians, deals quite a bit with both – how God will wrap up the human experiment as well as the fate of individuals who have followed the Way of Jesus. Last week, we explored John the Revelator’s vision of the future and the general promise that God is bringing a glorious future for God’s beloved. But this week, with Paul, the focus is on what each of us can expect “when we have shuffled off this mortal coil.”

I understand those interlocutors of Paul’s and their concern about the fate of the Christian after death. Death, after all, is a normal part of life, although our current culture tries to deny that fact as much as it can. There was always a natural, even comfortable, acceptance of death in my family as my long-deceased paternal grandfather and the two babies my parents had lost before I was born were remembered often with no hushing of their mention around me. I lost two chums to sudden deaths before I was eleven and in the six months before I turned eighteen, my mother, an aunt, and a cousin all died with another cousin following shortly after. The power of death has been quite real to me for a long time. If those who were close to me, even babies, could be taken... well, I had to deal with it. The teachings of the church have always been a comfort and a consolation, particularly when I was able to internalize them and combine them with the most important teaching we have to share as Christians – that God loves us and stands with us wherever we are, even on the other side of death.

Paul gives us two different approaches to learning to cope with the ongoing power of death in our world in the two passages we have before us today. I suspect this has mostly to do with the fact that he’s writing to two different groups of Christians, with slightly different concerns and ways of understanding the world around them. It may, of course, also be caused by a change in Paul’s understanding, although scholarly consensus is that these letters were written within a few years of each other. Still, we know just how much our perspectives can shift in the matter of just six months. Did anybody expect in February that we’d now be comfortable meeting as a congregation entirely through video? Or the two different approaches may simply signify that Paul was thinking about different things on the days he wrote.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul’s discussion of what the Christian can expect after death seems primarily focused on metaphysics, that is, the nuts and bolts of how the resurrection will work for us. It’s a reminder that Paul, before he was a Christian, was a Pharisee, and the Pharisees believed in the bodily resurrection of the righteous at “the Day of the Lord.” Paul would have studied and argued with his fellow students about this concept at the feet of the great teacher Gamaliel. His statement that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” sounds like a well-rehearsed position. If we jump over to his letter to the Romans, we remember that Paul was convinced that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” So, in order

for sinful humanity to be able to stand in the holy presence of God, Paul postulates, “this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.”

This idea that “we must be changed” also resonates with what Paul had been taught about Jesus following his conversion to Christianity. Earlier in I Corinthians 15, Paul writes: “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” From this teaching that he “received” as well as from his own experience, Paul knew that the resurrected Jesus did not have the same body that was crucified. Following the resurrection, Jesus could walk through locked doors as well as enjoy a breakfast of fish. He could appear to “more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time,” presumably not in one place. He could disappear from the dinner table in Emmaus. And he could appear to Paul on the road to Damascus some months or years after his other appearances. If so with Jesus, Paul reasons, then so with us. That is the promise of the resurrection manifest physically.

This is one way, Paul writes, that death will be shown to have been defeated. “Death has been swallowed up in victory;” in the victory of God over death shown in the raising of Jesus. After this reference to the work of the prophet Isaiah, Paul lifts from the prophet Hosea: “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” Again, this is classic Paul, the Pharisee scholar, quoting from the scriptures to make his point. Fortunately for those of us who love poetry, Paul’s borrowing from the prophets inspired another believer-poet some 1600 years later. John Donne wrote:

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;  
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow  
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.  
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,  
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,  
And soonest our best men with thee do go,  
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.  
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,  
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,  
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well  
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally  
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

Martin Luther wrote, “The Devil, that proud spirit, cannot bear to be mocked.” The Apostle Paul and John Donne, the divine sonneteer, likewise mock Evil’s constant companion, Death.

To the Romans, however, Paul takes a different approach when assuring them in regard to what the believer will discover after death. The last passage of Romans 8 is not Paul sticking his tongue out at death but rather bathing in the glory of God who saves from death. “God is for us,”

Paul confidently states, “so who can be against us?” Oh, certainly, the Christian will face opposition, but no opposition exists that is mightier than God, not even death. No one can condemn us to God because God has already justified us, and Christ Jesus continues to intercede for us, and we know that God thinks enough of Jesus to have raised him. By the time Paul was writing this letter to the Romans, Nero was likely on the throne of empire and the persecution of Christians was beginning to heat up. Paul sees the connection between the situation of the Christians in Rome and that of the Jews in the days of Psalm 44: “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.” Nevertheless, he writes, nothing can separate them from the love of Christ, not “hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword.”

Now, Paul knows a thing or two about hardship, distress, and so on. Let’s jump back to his correspondence with the Corinthians, this time in what we know as II Corinthians. In chapter 11, he writes: “Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.” If what Paul wrote about God’s defeat of the power of death in I Corinthians sounds like his transmission of what he’d learned, his words to the Romans on the same subject sound like what he’d lived.

I particularly love the last verses of the passage in Romans 8: “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” I still think Paul is speaking out of his own lived experience as a disciple of the Risen Jesus but here he’s borrowing from the language of his childhood worship to express it. Listen to the words of Psalm 139: “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,” even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.” God will be with us everywhere – in the height of the skies, in the depths of the Pit, across the sea, in the dark, in the light – nothing can separate us from God and God’s love.

My sisters and my brothers, death seems very present to us in our pandemic reality. The dreadful toll of COVID-19 continues to mount worldwide and nowhere with more virulence than in the United States. We have been blessed in our church family with health and recovery. But still we grieve for friends of friends, for notable persons in our culture, for the thousands that we do not know but who were precious to someone who now grieves. The good news is that resurrection, however that is actually manifest, awaits us all. I don’t claim this morning to have a confident metaphysical expectation as Paul does. I don’t know what that “undiscovered country” looks like. But, unlike Hamlet, I am not given pause, nor is my will puzzled. Rather, I know that my redeemer liveth, that our Loving Creator stands with us and that we can never be separated from the love of God through Christ Jesus. So, I say for us all this morning, as Paul

## God in the End

wrote to the Corinthians, “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.” Thanks be to God. Amen.