

I'm so grateful for Rev. Donald, Cathie and Rev. Wendy for going along with the theme of the Psalms this summer! This week we continue our Summer in the Psalms.

There was a group of U.C.W. (United Church Women) who were on their way to a rally. Sadly, tragically the bus crashed — and they immediately found themselves at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter was delighted to see them, though he sheepishly admitted that he wasn't expecting to see them so soon. He said that they had been renovating a large room for them but that it wasn't quite ready... labour shortage! He explained that they would have to spend just a little bit of time in the other place. "Not to worry though, it wouldn't be long!" Three weeks later St. Peter phones Hell to let them know the room was all ready for them. Satan starts begging St. Peter to let them stay just a little bit longer. "*We just need one more bake sale and we'll be able to afford air-conditioning!*"

The Psalms speak about death quite a lot. Psalm 103:13-16:

*As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.*

*For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.*

*As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.*

Or like the verses that we read this morning from Psalm 90 which laments the inevitability of death. "*For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh.*"

I feel like I need to stop for a second and talk about the wrath of God a bit. There's certainly more of that in the Psalms and the Old Testament than in the Gospels of Jesus, and that's always important to remember, because we read the whole Bible through the lens of Jesus who is the God in flesh and blood. But I hear a verse like this I hear God's judgment and anger at a world that is not as it should be. Not that God is an angry dude in the sky whom you can never please, but that God created something good — and despite the good, we've managed to make a mess of things, to cheat one another, to see some humans as worth more than other humans, to not respect God's creation — so there is an anger at the state of the world and a longing for it to be right and good.

Now back to our regularly scheduled topic of death: from wrath to death. (Aren't you glad you came this morning?!)

*"For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh.*

*The days of our life are seventy years or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.*

The Psalmist would agree with Thomas Hobbs that life is “nasty, brutish and short.”

What is interesting is that while the Psalms speak about and lament death quite a lot, the Psalms do not speak about the afterlife. The Psalms and the Old Testament in general do not talk about life after death. There are very few verses or references to an afterlife. They didn't have a theology or an understanding of there being life after this life. For them there is a more a sense of death being a nothingness.

Psalm 89:47 speaks to this. “*Remember how short my time is*” the Psalmist writes “— *for what vanity you have created all mortals! Who can live and never see death? Who can escape the power of Sheol?*” Sheol is not hell but it is the place— the state — of being dead.

In Psalm 30:10 the Psalmist cries: “*What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?*”

For Israel at this time, death or ‘the Pit’ or Sheol are places of non-life. It's not for lack of example that they didn't focus on the afterlife. Most of the nations around them had some belief systems around an afterlife. Egypt in particular had a huge focus on the afterlife. But for Israel, God is everlasting and eternal while humans are mortal and time limited.

It sounds a bit depressing to me. I've often, (I have to admit, almost pitied) atheist friends who have no belief in an afterlife. Like is this all there is — getting through this week? Maybe having a decent job or having a nice place to live or simply getting to your medical appointments or committee meetings on time — is life just like a moving sidewalk in an airport where you manage to move ahead slowly and accomplish the odd task or get patted on the back for this or that until suddenly the sidewalk ends and you are launched into nothing? It's a depressing thought!

As much as the Psalmists lamented the time-limited and sometimes difficult life, the overall picture was not depressing because this life was infused with God. There was a greater focus on the importance of life and living here and now in an awareness of God. There was also a greater sense of seeing this life as a gift not to be wasted ... a sense of heaven and the presence of God being here with us, if we only are aware of it. I don't think it is our problem in our Protestant tradition, but one of the criticisms we can have of religion or religious people is that they are so focused on the afterlife and on being saved that they don't care about this life. They can be so focused on not only their own eternal life, but on the ‘end times’ that they no longer care about making more of *this* life.

The Psalmists were not like that. They knew that the eternal, everlasting God cared

about this earthly life. God cares if you are cheating your neighbour. God cares if widows and orphans are hungry. God cares if kings and rulers exploit and kill people and if 'ordinary you' is not living a just and caring life. This short life mattered to God and so it mattered to them. Now at some point their understanding of God, their theology, shifted. I don't know when or how, but we know that by the time we get to the life of Jesus there is debate within the Jewish faith. The Sadducees stuck to the old ways of thinking that there was nothing after this life, but the Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead.

Jesus did too.

At one point, the Sadducees came to Jesus to argue with him about the resurrection of the dead and they gave a bit of a ridiculous hypothetical example: a guy dies and his wife marries his brother, according to tradition, but then that brother dies so she marries the next brother on and on 7 times. Then they ask: "In heaven, whose husband will she be?" Matthew 22:23-33

*Jesus answered them, "You are wrong because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection people neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels of God in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is God not of the dead but of the living." And when the crowds heard it, they were astounded at his teaching.*

Understandings about death are fascinating. For a lot of our Christian history, they believed that we would all stay dead until the resurrection of the dead. In other words, we all stay dead until the big day at the end of times when everyone is raised to eternal life at the same time. That's the reason that in cemeteries the tomb stones tend to face the east — because the belief is that when Jesus returns it will be from the east — from the place the sun rises and a new day begins. And when people are buried in caskets they are buried with their feet to the east so that when that day comes, they can stand up and face Jesus. Today we believe that eternal life begins immediately.

We think of those words of Jesus on the cross that he spoke to the thief beside him: "Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus replied, "I assure you that today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:42-43) We believe that when Jesus died on the cross, he went to and through death and so conquered death. He didn't just conquer his own death — he defeated all death.

Yesterday we said goodbye to one of the great saints of this church, the Rev. Doug Warren. It is a huge loss. But I can't help but imagine him alive in God's house and reunited with my father Rev. Dr. Alan Bennett and Pastor Stewart Froese. The three of them were the dream team of clergy here at Wall Street 20 years ago, and now they have all gone to their eternal home.

Doug lived his life like this life matters. Not to prove anything — not to earn his way into heaven, but because he experienced God's great love for him. Some people told him that God didn't love him because he was a gay man. But Doug knew God remembered him and loved him and he spent his life sharing that love and caring for those who felt forgotten. Doug brought God's eternal love and life to earth. I have no doubt that he has entered into the glorious presence of God. And what's that like? We don't know. Death and life-after-death remain a mystery. But I do want to share one story from Pastor Stewart.

Some of you remember his wonderful children's stories. He was famous for his kids' stories during the worship service! During one story Stewart was talking about meaningful words and names, and as an example he asked the kids if their mothers had a special name for them. He shared that his mother had a special pet name for him, but that no one else apart from his sister and his wife (and of course his parents) ever knew that name. Well after the children shared, one well-spoken girl lifted up her hand and said something like "We shared the special names our mothers had for us. I think you should tell us your special name." In that moment Stewart felt prompted to share this special name. And it shows his great love and respect for the children of this church that he did. He said his special name is "Butch", and he told the children that no one was allowed to call him that because it was just his mother's name for him. Later that same week Stewart emailed me with a story about death and his belief in the afterlife. This is what he wrote.

*"My mother died last May, and the next night my daughter had a dream. Jeannette dreamt that she was walking hand in hand with her grandmother on a beautiful beach at sunset. In the dream it seemed to her that she was about 5 years old and Grammie was maybe about 30. My daughter goes on to describe what Grammie was wearing and how beautiful she looked and how warm and loved she felt and many other details. But just before the dream ended my mother said to Jeannette: 'Tell Butch that heaven is just what we thought it would be'.*

*"Now the interesting thing is that Jeannette did not know that "Butch" was the special name my Mother called me. In fact, until last Sunday's Kid's Time, only my Dad, Lily Jean and my sister knew that. It had quite an impact on all of us.*

*"And what is heaven like for Mom and me? It is warm, loving, accepting, beautiful, peaceful, belonging, healing, with nature at its richest, family and friends united, the Father-Mother God embracing us close, it is this life extended but in perfection, it is peace and wholeness, where all is forgiven, and all is healed....this is not something I believe, this is something I know. And now I know that Mom and I were right!"*

We are called in this life to love. To love God, to respect life — all life! We are called to share that love with everyone. And one day we will cross the river and pain will be no more, and we will live forever in God's love. Thanks be to God.