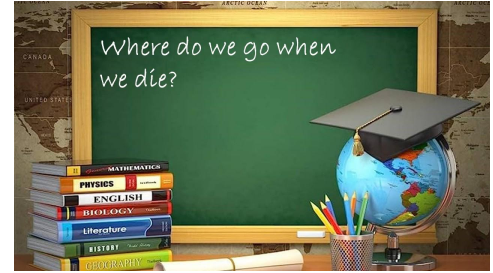


It's Up to You 2023 (Week 8): Where do we go when we die?

Yesterday's Sermon - In 10 Sentences or Less

1) This is one of the great mysterious questions all human beings wonder about, and we need to approach it with the requisite humility required, knowing that, as Christian philosopher Nancey Murphy puts it, it will stretch the limits of language and defy verbal description, making silence perhaps the best possible response.



2) Christian scholars don't have a uniform understanding of what we might call "the afterlife": for example, a) some New Testament texts take the same perspective as 1st-century Judaism, thinking that we go to some intermediate place or state to await final resurrection (see Luke 23.43, for example),, while b) other scholars think all the verbiage in the New Testament about resurrection, new creation, etc. just points to our spirits or souls living with God forever in the spiritual realm called heaven.

3) We tried to get beyond all that interpretive difficulty and just ask, "What will the experience of heaven/new creation be like, whatever it is?"

4) First, it will feel like the culmination of our lifetime journey or pilgrimage, toward which we've been moving for our entire lives (see Hebrews 11.13-16).

5) In that sense, heaven is a homecoming: it will seem like home to us in a way that nothing else ever has (see the lengthy quote from Frederick Buechner below to expand on that idea).

6) And what is this home like?...Well, it's God's house, in which His will and wishes are fully and willingly done, so in a sense it will look like all that Jesus taught and did 24/7.

7) Second, heaven is freedom from bondage and suffering, an idea best expressed and embraced in our country by African-American spirituality: the apostle Paul compares our earthly life to no less than the pains of labor, while heaven is more like how we feel as the baby has arrived (see Romans 8.22-23).

8) Third, because we will know God fully in heaven, we will also know ourselves fully - the former makes the latter possible (as John Calvin and Thomas Merton, among others, have noted).

9) Theologians speak of a "continuity of self" between who we are now and who will be in heaven, which is to say, it will be the same me or you, at least in some measure, and the biblical validation of that is that Jesus' disciples could recognize Him post-resurrection (see the quote from Hans Frei in the next section below).

10) But you in heaven will be the very best version of yourself that you've yet to encounter, the you God has been constructing over the course of your lifetime (see 1st John 3.2 and 2nd Corinthians 4.16-19; see also the C. S. Lewis quote below).

Quotes Worth Pondering

Four quotes worth mulling over and over this week, two from the sermon, two uncovered in the research for it...

Frederick Buechner, in *The Longing For Home*:

...No matter how much the world shatters us to pieces, we carry inside us a vision of wholeness that we sense is our true home and that beckons to us...The word "longing" comes from the same root as the word "long" in the sense of length in either time or space and also the word "belong," so that in its full richness "to long" suggests to yearn for a long time for something that is a long way off and something that we feel we belong to and that belongs to us. The longing for home is so universal a form of longing that there is even a special word for it, which is of course "homesickness"...The Kingdom of God is where we belong. It is home, and whether we realize it or not, I think we are all of us homesick for it.

Hans Frei (professor of theology at Yale; 20th-century):

The mystery to which the New Testament accounts testify...is the continuity of the identity of Jesus through the real, complete disruption of death. He is the same before and after death...Thus, it is Jesus Christ who remains capable of saving us in our mortal conditions...This message is far more important than any theories we may form about the nature of the resurrection.

C. S. Lewis, in *The Weight of Glory*:

It is a serious thing...to remember that the dullest, most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship...It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all of our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.

Sophfonia Scott, in *The Seeker and the Monk* (from the last chapter on meeting death without fear):

Sometimes I dream of a place I've never been, yet it seems so deeply familiar...There is something different about the place – it radiates a warm and gentle glow, like the golden hour of light in that precious time right before the sun begins to set...I know that I am not alone. The place feels spacious yet full all at once. And though I'm standing there, it feels like I'm being pulled there, as if it's pulling me into safe harbor. My whole life feels like a course toward this place. It's a joyous feeling, like I'm a child running on sandy shores. And I know that I will recognize this place when I arrive, even though it will be for the very first time.