

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC
THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 22, 2009
The Rev. J. Barry Kramer
Lenten Sermon Series - Part III: Eternal Life
“Life After Death?”

“For I know that my redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes (and ears) shall behold, and not another.” [Job 19:26-27]

For our third Sunday in this Lenten sermon series I have chosen a text totally unrelated to the lessons of the day because the subject falls hard on the heels of our discussion last week on “The Eternal Sacrifice.” At the end of that discussion we said that Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross was tied into his resurrection which followed, and that his rising to life again was the chief benefit, without which much of our belief in Christ would seem empty.

Thus we glare at the questions. Is there really life after death? Will we, as Job suggests, “see God?” Is there really any kind of a resurrection, and if there is, do we immediately move on to another existence? Or do we, as the Jews believe and St. Paul implies, sort of “lie fallow”, waiting for the Messiah or a last trumpet when we will all be caught up into what some call “the rapture?”

As a way of getting at these questions and of providing a basis for our discussion, I would like to share another personal experience with you. After my diagnosis of leukemia in 1990, I became well-acquainted with Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, whose work in the past centered around the investigation of what we call “near-death experiences”, or “NDE’s”. This is a time when a dying person is “brought back” to life and can remember what happened to them during the time when they seemed to be dying. Through the years, Kubler-Ross has personally interviewed many of these people and recorded their stories. As a result of her research, many books have been written and many other people have become interested in the subject.

I mention all of this only because the following personal experience occurred *several years* before I had ever met Dr. Kubler-Ross, and before I knew anything about NDE’s and her conclusions. It all started one day when I received a phone call from a family whom I had known in connection with my work among the deaf here in North Carolina. The father of this family was deaf and it was his daughter who said, “Daddy almost died last night and our minister is out of town. Daddy is asking for you. Could you please come? He won’t speak with anyone else!” I immediately said yes and assumed that this was a death bed confession of a dying deaf person who wanted to communicate with a priest in private who could understand sign language, thus eliminating the need for a third party interpreter. While confession of sorts was a part of this man’s need, the primary reason he wanted to see me was to share an unusual experience that he didn’t understand. As best I can remember, this was his story.

“I was brought to the hospital because my pacemaker was not working right and it looked like I was having another heart attack. They got me here in time and the doctors were able to stabilize my condition. I was very tired so I went to sleep. The next thing I remember was waking up to see many lights of different colors. They were all around me. In the middle of these lights someone was standing there and talking to me. It was a man and he said he wanted me to come with him. I began to sign to him that I didn’t want to go anywhere, when I realized that he spoke to me and that we could understand each other *without sign language!* He asked me why I didn’t want to go with him and I answered, ‘because I am not sure what I believe, and I don’t understand what it says in the Bible. I am confused by the different translations.’ Then I remember feeling that he was leaving and the lights began to dim, but I somehow understood that I was being allowed to stay to work on my belief. Suddenly, there were doctors and nurses all around me with machines and someone was pressing on my chest. I couldn’t tell them I was OK because I am deaf and my voice is lousy. Finally I was able to raise my arm and wave that I was better. They stopped working on me and I was able to breathe again. When I had time to think about it, I realized that I had seen the Lord and I remembered that verse from the Bible in the book of Job that we use in funeral services. You know, the one where Job says he shall see God! So I think I have seen Jesus and he has given me permission to stay here a while. As I tried to tell him, the older I get the more confused I am about what I believe. So I decided I needed to talk with someone I can trust, and I remembered you!”

What followed was not really a confession, but a memoir. My friend Paul had made notes and gave me his life history. He had even shortened the parts that I already knew about! At the end, he had some questions; the very same questions asked at the beginning of this sermon. Is there really life after death? Will we, as Job suggests, “see God?” Is there really any kind of a resurrection, and if there is, do we immediately move on to another existence? Remembering that he had been allowed to return to work on what Kubler-Ross calls “unfinished business”, Paul also asked me “where do I start?” So let’s think about these questions and see if we can figure out where to start!

The first answer I gave to my friend Paul was right on target with what I later learned from Kubler-Ross; namely that there is no “death” as we think of it. Rather there is a “transition” to another form of life. In other words, yes, there is “life after life.” I used to think that the phrase, “she has ‘passed on’” was a denial of reality. After many experiences with Hospice patients as a chaplain, I now believe that this phrase is exactly right. When this body stops functioning, we will “pass on” to another form of existence.

The second thing I told Paul was that he would indeed “see” God, or as much of God as he could handle. Thus the form of life that he saw in the light was hard to recognize at first, but then he realized it was Jesus. Note also that there was motion into the next level of life immediately; thus Paul was not aware of what was going on around him in the hospital. In other words, there is no “limbo” between stages of existence.

Paul was allowed to return because we are supposed to finish our work here on earth before moving on. Otherwise we will take it with us and maybe have to work on it there? In the years following my diagnosis, I have thought about this many times. Just when I think I have finished everything I am supposed to do, I get sent to do something else. And so here I am in Sparta!!

So where do we start? Start wherever you are! Make a list of the questions you have about death and dying. Prioritize them and take one day and one question at a time. Talk with God and talk with your priest, or with a counselor that you trust. And remember that no matter what you do, in the words of another Paul, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God..."

Whatever happened to my friend Paul? Well, according to his wife Bashie, Paul began a strange series of actions. He began traveling to Duke University Library where he studied various translations of the Bible. He had begun a translation of the Bible into American Sign language when a strange event occurred. He was telling a joke at the deaf Lions Club of which he was a member when suddenly he had a heart attack after telling them the punch line. Paul died amidst laughter! Obviously, he had finished his business!