

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

I Wonder About Life After Death

Sunday, February 2

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A comedian once quipped, “I am not afraid of death. I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”

It’s a funny line, but it reveals that most people are afraid of death. Ironically, I have entitled this sermon, “I Wonder about Life after Death,” but most of us choose to ignore the subject altogether. It’s not pleasant.

And then weeks like this last one come barging in and we can’t help but stare death in the face. Of course, I am referring to the tragic death of basketball star Kobe Bryant, his thirteen year old daughter and those other precious souls on that helicopter. It’s been all over the news. All over social media. All over our lives. It has gripped our nation.

Why? This is certainly not the first time the death of a celebrity has been in the news. Nor is it the first time we have heard of young people dying in tragic accidents. Why has our nation been so overwhelmed by this particular tragic death? I believe we can relate to that picture of smiling Kobe with his daughter who is also smiling, putting her head on his shoulder – a proud father and a happy daughter. Lives so vibrant, young, ambitious, and joyful were snuffed out so quickly. One minute they are headed to a basketball game and the next minute they are gone. It’s not supposed to happen this way!

The pain and the mystery of it is so enormous that some folks reach desperately for an answer by saying, “Well God must have needed Kobe and his daughter in heaven. Everything happens for a reason. When it’s your time, it’s your time.” Well, that’s garbage. It’s toxic theology.

God often gets blamed for things that God did not do! We have all heard the language. A baby dies and someone says, “God needed another angel in heaven.” A young mother dies of breast cancer leaving a husband and two kids behind and someone says, “God works in mysterious ways.” A 50 year old overworks his whole life, doesn’t take care of himself, and dies of a heart attack and someone says, “The Lord knows best.” A group of teenagers on their way to prom are killed in a car accident and someone says, “God must have a purpose. When it’s your time, it’s your time.” What? In other words, “Everything happens for a reason.”

It is beyond me how some folks who read the same Bible I do and follow the same Christ that I follow can believe that God would orchestrate unspeakable tragedy and pain in life. It is beyond me how some folks believe that the same God who personified himself in Christ and put little children on his knee would kill children with cancer, kill teenagers through car accidents, and wipe out families with tornadoes, earthquakes and hurricanes. It is beyond me.

Bottom line folks – Everything does not happen for a reason, at least not in the way people usually mean that phrase. The God I know and love would not plot and plan suffering and tragedy. Sometimes things happen because of the foolishness of others. Sometimes things happen because of our own bad choices. Sometimes things happen because we live in an evil and imperfect world. But let’s not blame tragedy and suffering on God.

When God created us he gave us free will. He loves us enough to allow us to choose to love

him back. Otherwise, we would be a bunch of robots programmed to love and there is really no such thing as forced love.

But the shadow side to a world with free will is that there is room for bad choices, mistakes, bad timing and decisions, all of which can cause pain, difficulty, frustration, tragedy and adversity. What caused Kobe Bryant's death was the either mechanical failure or pilot error, all the product of a free existence, not the hand of God.

So when bad things happen it doesn't mean God caused them to happen.

In fact, Jesus himself dispelled this misguided belief in the gospel of Luke. In the 13th chapter Jesus references a construction tragedy that killed 18 laborers. Many people in Jesus' day assumed that God caused the accident to punish the laborers for their sins. Jesus completely rejected the idea. This is what Jesus said in verse 4, **“Those eighteen who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you – no!”** There it is – straight from the Bible!

And I know that many of you need that reassurance because for too long you have heard Christians blame catastrophes on God. For too long many of you have been hurt by people who say in the midst of your pain, “Everything happens for a reason.” In this text Jesus said, “No!”

Today, I want to take a few minutes and address the reality of death. I want to remind us of some lessons about death that will help you. I also want to remind us what our faith teaches us about death.

Many of us see death as the great taker of life when actually the opposite is true; death is the great giver of life. As we struggle with the mystery of our death, we discover the meaning of our lives. Albert Schweitzer put the proper perspective on death:

We must all become familiar with the thought of death if we want to grow into really good people. We need not think of it every day or every hour. But when the path of life leads us to some vantage point where the scene around us fades away and we contemplate the distant view right to the end, let us not close our eyes. Let us pause for a moment, look at the distant view, and then carry on. Thinking about death in this way produces love for life. When we are familiar with death we accept each week, each day, as a gift. Only if we are able to accept life—bit by bit, does it become precious.

Death teaches us that life is a precious gift from God. If it wasn't for the fleeting nature of life, we would not love and appreciate it like we do. When we realize the preciousness of our time, we will make full use of our time. We cannot live life with courage, joy, and confidence unless we face the reality of our own death. In fact, M. Scott Peck reminds us that we cannot live fully unless there is something we are willing to die for. This is why Don Juan, the great Indian guru, called death the great ally.

If we choose to see the great things death can teach us, death can become a very powerful friend. The beautiful irony is that once we come to accept death and what it teaches us, we truly begin to live.

Let us dive deeper into the great mystery of death and try to catch a glimpse of the other side. After all, the wonder of this sermon begs the question, “What happens to us when we die?” Well, our faith tells us a great deal about death.

Behind the curtain of death for believers is a new dimension of life beyond our wildest dreams. What is beneath the mysterious surface of death is a loving, caring God with the answers to all of our questions, the fulfillment of all of our deepest longings, and the fruition of all God's great promises.

How do we know that life after death promises to be an overwhelming experience of joy for those who believe? The Bible tells us so. Let's

take a look at what the Bible says about life after death.

Perhaps the most familiar passage of Scripture that promises the gift of life after death is found in John 14:1-3. Here we find Jesus in the upper room comforting his disciples before his own death:

Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am you may be also (John 14:1-3).

These are beautiful words that should comfort believers who find themselves apprehensive about death. This passage also reveals interesting aspects about life after death. For example, the word "rooms" could also be interpreted as "rest areas." In other words, these rooms are not permanent but provide respite. This implies that death is really a threshold to a whole new journey with God. On this journey we will be provided with comfort and rest along the way.

In addition to the passage in John, we find profound passages about life after death in the letters of Paul. If we had lived during the time of the apostle Paul and we asked him what he believed about life after death, I believe his answer would be what we find in 2nd Corinthians 5:1-2:

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling.

Later on in verse five of the same chapter Paul reminds us that God, who has prepared our heavenly dwelling, has given us the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of our extraordinary life after death.

Maybe the most compelling of Paul's words about life after death can be found in the fifteenth

chapter of First Corinthians where Paul reminds us that **"if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied"** (verse 19). Paul's argument is clear: If there is no resurrection of the dead then Christ has not been raised from the dead. If Christ has not been raised from the dead then our faith means nothing (1st Corinthians 15:12-13).

Paul's conviction leads us to the central promise our Lord gave us about life after death when he said, **"Because I live, you also will live" (John 14:19).**

As Christians we have nothing to fear from death. With Paul we know that "nothing can separate us from the love of God," especially death! We are promised that death is simply a journey into a deeper intimacy with God.

Perhaps you are still asking, "Well, what is death going to be like?" Well, I don't know. "I ain't dead yet!" However, from my experience as a pastor sitting with people on their death bed, I believe I can give us some idea what it will be like to die.

The experience of death could be compared to something I experienced as a kid. In fact, most of you have experienced this. I would fall asleep in front of the TV or at an event. And my mother or dad would carry me to my bedroom, and put me to bed. When I awoke the next morning, the sun would be shining. I didn't remember how I got there, but I knew my parents had something to do with it.

I believe death is like that. It is like we have fallen asleep and God has us in his hands. When we awake, the world will be changed, our bodies will be changed and God's Kingdom will be established forever and ever. We don't know how we got there, but we know God made it happen.

The most profound attempt at explaining what we can expect from the mystery of death came from my colleague and friend Ed Beck. When Ed

was serving a church in Denver he had a seven year old member of his congregation named Ellen who was dying of an incurable disease. And each time he would visit her in the hospital she would take him by the hand and lead him to other rooms to meet her friends. She was a real precocious child. A month before Ellen died he was visiting her and she said, “Rev. Beck, my mother told me to talk to you about dying. I don’t want to die. Can you tell me what will happen when I die?”

Ed sat in a rocking chair and put Ellen on his lap and responded, “Ellen, before you were ever born you were in your mother’s tummy, tucked away very near your mommy’s loving heart. At that time, let’s suppose someone had said to you, ‘Ellen, you can no longer live in your mommy’s tummy. It is time for you to die out of your mommy’s tummy.’ Now, Ellen, let’s suppose you said, ‘I don’t want to leave my mommy’s tummy. I love it here. It is nice and comfortable, and I feel very much loved in my mommy’s tummy. I don’t want to die out of my mommy’s tummy. I don’t want to be born because that means I’d have to leave my mommy’s tummy.’”

Ed continued and said, “But Ellen, you already know what happened. You did die out of your mommy’s tummy and look what you discovered. You discovered in this world loving arms to hold you, loving faces smiling at you and everyone wanting to meet your every need. And now for seven years you have discovered how wonderful it is to be out of your mommy’s tummy. In fact, it is so wonderful that you don’t want to die. You don’t want to leave here. You don’t want to leave here because you know you are loved by mommy and daddy, your grandmas, and your brother and so many, many others, including me.”

Ellen thought for a moment about the things Ed was saying to her. And then Ed said, “Ellen,

there will soon come a time when you will die, and here is what is going to happen. The moment you die you will discover strong, loving arms holding you, loving faces smiling at you, and everyone will want to meet your every need. You will be surrounded by such love and beauty that soon, very soon you will say, ‘I love it here. I don’t want to leave here.’ And Ellen, you won’t leave. You will remain there and live with Jesus in heaven forever. Ellen, that is what is going to happen when you die.” Then Ed concluded, “Oh, and one last thing. When you welcome me into heaven, take my hand and lead me from room to room so I can meet all your friends. Promise. Promise me you will do that. Promise!”

Jesus said, “I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2).



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