

The (Eternal) Debate About An Afterlife

Reflections on Luke 20:27-38

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“God is a God not of the dead, but of the living, for to God, all of them are alive.”

Do you believe in life after death? Will we meet our loved ones when we die? Is there a heaven? These are challenging questions, especially on this Remembrance Day, when we are all sensitized to loss and some still seek comfort for their war wounds. But the lectionary presents this passage today, so I'll offer my best available, biblically-based thoughts, my intuition - for what that may be worth - and some of what I've read. Did you see the cover story of the United Church Observer this week? It's about research into the possibility of an afterlife.

There is, of course, no definitive answer to questions about afterlife and resurrection. These were posed to Jesus as a religious riddle about the laws of marriage, to challenge him. Saducees and Pharisees, two of the 'denominations' of Jews in his time, took different 'doctrinal' positions on the afterlife question. Jesus took the Pharisee position - 'yes' to an afterlife - but how he describes it opens up the genuine 'complexity' of this concept. Grasping 'resurrection' involves a quantum imaginative leap. You can't quite get there via a rational-material worldview.

Jesus takes up the marriage law metaphor of the riddle, to show that there is an afterlife, but it is not like this life. The conventions of marriage - however sacred to us - are irrelevant in 'the other age.' There is no gender among the angels beyond death, therefore no human bodies. Jesus' vision of afterlife did not involve our 'mortal' bodies, because he states that 'they cannot die.'

So Jesus is not endorsing the bodily resurrection after death that some Jews - and many Christians still - anticipate. (Photo #1) Do you know that the most cherished burial place in the orthodox Jewish world is outside of walls of Jerusalem, beyond

the dip of the Kidron Valley and up the side of the Mount of Olives? It's a very expensive place to be laid to rest! (Photo #2) This burial place is cherished because of the ancient belief that these people would be the first resurrected, upon the Coming of the Messiah. Everyone there is buried,(photo #3) row on row, in stone caskets above the ground. Their feet are all pointed toward the sacred city - ready to march on down the hill into Jerusalem.

Those who imagine the afterlife as physical reunion with their loved ones, may feel disappointed. I'm sorry. (And I may not be right!) Those who adhere to Christianity primarily as 'the way to get to heaven,' may have to re-evaluate too. Nowhere does Jesus suggest that heaven is simply a rerun of life in this human form, exclusively for those who are good. That verse about "those who are considered worthy" of the next life was not likely Jesus' phrase. He just didn't ever judge people that way. That verse sounds like the 'edited in' voice of later Christianity, setting its own moral standard and using heaven and hell as carrot and stick.

To support the reality of his vision of resurrection, Jesus echoes Moses' revelation that "all are alive in God", dead or living. This strikes a chord of mystical Truth for me. There have been moments when I've glimpsed how 'God is in all and all are in God.' So my best understanding of the afterlife rises from my 'belief' in the panentheistic God. God, to me, is not a being separate from Creation. God is in me and in all things, both enfolding and permeating all Creation. God is 'consciousness', a loving intelligent force, forever creating, transforming and expanding...like the evolving universe that we can now know. The material world is God energy taking and changing 'forms.'

God is creative love energy to me. And do you remember that basic law of physics we learned in highschool? "Energy cannot be created or destroyed. It can only change form." I believe that when we die, the 'God in us' energy of our consciousness - what religion sometimes calls 'soul' - simply leaves this carbon-based form. Our loving consciousness is transformed into the next level of complexity. And my experiences of the 'presence' of those who have died, affirms

for me this sense of a 'life beyond life' beyond this time.

I just read Bishop John Spong's latest book: "Eternal Life: A New Vision." The bestselling Episcopal Bishop, who liberated mainstream Christians from biblical literalism with his good scholarship and sharp wit, writes now in his seventies, with death as his horizon. I would say his book is a credible, beautiful and biblical sunset vision.

Spong writes: "Humanity is not alone, as we once thought, separated from God and thus in need of rescue. We are increasingly aware that we are part of what God is, and we are at one with God...It has been the human destiny, to walk through the fearful and the limiting, in order to discover the transcendent and the infinitely real...[now] we sense that finitude actually fades into infinity, that earth is the doorway to heaven and that the human is, and can be transformed into the divine."

What do I believe? I believe that these bodies are temporal and temporary vehicles of what I call 'God-consciousness.' A consciousness that comes through our brain, but is part of a 'mind' that is not just housed in our bodies. Current neuroscience supports this intuition. The Observer article quotes studies of near death experiences, where people were able to describe verifiable events that occurred while they were medically 'brain dead.'

My experiences around both birth and death were revelations of God to me. Both felt like portals where 'God -consciousness' enters and departs our particular form. What is on the other side of that portal many people have described and surmised. Along with all our other human feelings when we witness birth and death, there is a holy shiver of ecstatic energy in the room. Consciousness moving in or out.

Alex McKeague and I had some honest talks about the afterlife question, when he was dying of cancer. His critical scientist's mind threw up good questions. He wondered if his imminent death would simply be 'the end.' Then his discovery of meditation led him to find his own answers. Moments of mystical experience

verified the eternal for him. Like the day here at church when he declared to me in amazement. “That tree *is* my brother!”

I don't want to make a saint of Alex. He wasn't. But he was a man who really prepared for his death by living his life as a spiritual challenge to grow. Close to his death, he said to me with genuine curiosity and pleasure: “I get to see what comes next!”

Does he live still? You bet. Ask Jane! Alex was a soil scientist. Wouldn't he laugh if I suggested that his molecules are now making great compost? He could laugh, because at the end of his life, he got what Jesus was saying. We're not about our bodies. But our bodies are a gift to experiment with, to grow God-consciousness with, for a while. And when the experience of a mortal life is done, non-material God-consciousness, something of us continues in God-consciousness. Becoming something new.

Bishop Spong reads the Gospel of John, ‘the mystical Gospel’, as Jesus' life showing us eternal life...by being what is divine in being human. This is Spong's conclusion:

“I prepare for death by living...when I die I will rest my case in the being of which I am part...I believe deeply that this life that I love so passionately is not all there is....Job asked: ‘If a man dies will he live again?’ My answer would be yes, yes, yes!”

My answer to the riddle of the afterlife is also yes. What does your good mind and deepest intuition tell you?

Think about that as we sing: ‘Thanks for Life’ at Voices United #706