

**Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist**  
**“The After-Life”**  
**The Rev. Dr. Morris W. Hudgins**  
**April 11, 2010**

Reading: Psalm 49

### Introduction

Some time ago on a hot summer day I needed to replace a water heater. I called Pete the Plumber, a man who installs these tanks around the clock. He said it would take him about an hour. I watched as he began his work.

As he worked and I watched, he asked: "What do you do for a living?" I usually don't volunteer this information in this kind of situation but reluctantly told him. I told him I was a minister. Then came the big question: "What variety?" I should have known immediately this was going to be one of those long conversations. I told him I was a Unitarian Universalist. He said, "Oh, really!"--with an exclamation. He then said, "Frank Lloyd Wright--wasn't he a Unitarian? I had surprised him. Now he surprised me. Pete was no ordinary plumber.

Then began the long discussion that as it turned out I rather enjoyed. The only problem was that the one hour job became a two hour job because of that one question about my profession. That question was followed by many. It was like he was ready for a discussion about death and this was his opportunity to have it. I wasn't ready for a theological discussion as I was watching the installation of a water heater.

Then came the deep question: "What do you think happens when we die?" I don't know what he expected, but I gave him my usual: "I'm not sure." He almost dropped the torch in his hand. I thought: "Why did I tell this man I am a minister?" Now he is going to screw up my water heater and charge me an arm and a leg.

He regained the grip on the torch and said, "What? You are a minister and you don't know what happens when we die?" "I'm sorry," but I really don't." He said, "You mean, you don't believe in heaven?" "No, I didn't say that. I said, "I an not sure what happens when we die."

He began to calm down a little. "Okay, what do you think happens?"

Probably nothing. That may be it. It's over. On the other hand, if you want to believe in an after-life that is perfectly okay with me.

If I was one of those Bible quoting preachers I could have quoted from Matthew, chapter 22, verse 32: "God is not God of the dead but of the living," said Jesus.

I could have also told Plumber Pete that the concept of resurrection is a very controversial theological position. When I was a Methodist I used to do surveys about people's belief in the physical resurrection. I quickly learned that most Methodists and Presbyterians didn't believe in the physical resurrection. Most believe in the spiritual resurrection, which is the belief taught by Paul in the New Testament. I could have also told Pete that the belief in resurrection is the result of the human desire for immortality. Let's look for a few moments at the Jewish concept of the after-life.

### Jewish Thought

The concept of resurrection and the after-life are not important to Jewish thought including the Jew Jesus. My favorite scriptures are found in the Psalms of the Old Testament. The psalmists were very human, very existential. They knew pain and they expressed their anguish in their writing. In Psalm 49 we read:

Yes. . .even the wise die, the fool and the stupid alike  
 must perish and leave their wealth to others.

Their graves are their homes forever,  
 their dwelling places to all generations,  
 though they name lands their own.

We cannot abide in our pomp,  
 we are like the beast that perish. (vs. 10-12)

We are like beasts: we are born, we live, and we die. In chapter 73 the psalmist admits that there is no reward for doing good. He writes:

Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken, and chastened every morning. (vs. 12-14).

Sometimes it is in vain that we do good. We are guaranteed no reward in heaven.

The idea of life after death was not nearly as important to Jewish thought as it became to Christianity later. God in Judaism is a God of the living and not of the dead. This is where Jesus received his idea. God is the source of all life, including regenerative power. In my view, this is not far from the pagan belief that divinity is symbolized by nature. Death and rebirth are part of the cycle of life. Symbols of nature, earth, sky, the sea, became divine symbols. On Earth Day in two weeks we will celebrate "Our Sacred Trees." We will take our message from the movie *Avatar*.

Maybe we should listen to the message of the people of Pandora.

### **Apocalyptic Literature**

Respect for the earth is not a new idea. We should look to Genesis: God created the earth and said it was good. But then we also see in Judaism that we shall have dominion over the earth. Before Judaism we have the immortality of the Kings, God's chosen leaders. This then evolved into Yahweh, or God, as the Eternal King who would live forever. Late in Jewish thought, close to the time of Jesus, the Jews began to think in terms of a messiah who would come and be that King who would reign and distribute Justice to the world. In the book of Daniel, written in the second century B.C.E. we read of the righteous being resurrected and "shining like the stars forever." (12:3) This apocalyptic book is similar to Revelation in the New Testament. Most apocalyptic literature was written during times of severe persecution for the Jews, like Revelation was written during times of persecution for the early Christians. Daniel was written by a pious Jew during the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanies between 167 and 164 B.C.E. It is ironic that Daniel is also written in Aramaic, the same language of Jesus later. The author writes:

At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time; but at that time your people shall be delivered, every one whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. (Dan. 12:1-3)

While once the Jews thought the dead would reside in Sheol, now they began to believe in a concept of the resurrection of the dead or the immortality of the soul another concept borrowed from the Greeks. The idea of resurrection, earlier shunned by the Jews, now became the norm. Because of the Christian emphasis on the resurrection, I feel this idea has been given more importance that it should have. Overall, in Jewish thought, there is emphasis on how we live today, and not the after-life.

Christianity has left us with a theology that places heaven as a reward for good living and hell as our eternal punishment. Jesus became a ransom figure, dying on the cross for all of our sins. There are some logical questions that need to be asked of this theology: Are we not responsible for our own wrongdoing? Can a person live a life of evil, then repent on his deathbed and still get into heaven? Is there no justice? Can a person ask God for forgiveness and never ask for the forgiveness of our neighbors? Can one live a good life not for some reward but because it is goodness is its own reward, like virtue.

As it turned out Pete the Plumber was concerned about life after death because his parents had become Mormons and he wasn't sure about these Mormons. I told him I thought Mormons were good people. I can't buy their theology but its no more far-fetched than other Christian churches.

I am sure Pete thought my ideas were far-fetched as well. But he liked my open-minded view of different theologies. I didn't want to make Pete into a Unitarian Universalist, but at least I made him aware there is a religion that allows many roads to truth. This is the greatest virtue of our particular religion.

If we would have had more time, I would have shocked Pete even more. I could have also told him I was an existentialist--that I believe we create life out of self and the self does not exist before we are born. I could have said that there is no divine plan, that meaning is found in life and not in the after-life, that it is our responsibility to live a good life even if there is no life after death. After all, "virtue is its own reward." Like the existentialist I believe we are born, we create meaning and joy, but we also suffer and die. Life is most uncertain. Our individual lives are also precarious and uncertain. We are filled with anxiety and guilt. We don't always do as we should. We don't take advantage of what is given us.

In my conversation with Wendy as we planned this service we talked about the experience of death as a time of incredible meaning for the living. She said, "We are the ones who are transported into another place." It is a time for us to turn to our connections in this life, looking back on the life of another.

Tom Olshefski, who is teaching a class on "Near-death experiences" also talks about the importance of a belief in life after death, but in another way. He writes:

My own views regarding the existence of some form of "after-life" are not based on any religious teaching, biblical or otherwise. I discarded that basis for my beliefs long ago, in part due to my education and training in physics and the philosophy of science. However, over the past two decades I have found an entirely new basis for a belief that our consciousness, our sense of identity, our lessons learned and our ability to love, all do in fact survive the death of our physical body. This new basis is the growing body of evidence collected, investigated, and analyzed by well-trained researchers using the best tools and techniques of modern science.

I want to affirm this type of "life after death." But it also is a concept that is important for the living more than the dead.

Some of my favorite travel experiences have been to witness how former generations have treated the dead. I have been to New Grange in Ireland, a Passage Tomb where people came on the Winter and Summer Solstice to remember their ancestors, to honor them. I have been to a cemetery in Austria where they buried their dead, then removed them years later, to decorate their skulls, then place them in a building for all to see. I thought it would be creepy, but it was done very respectfully. It was also pragmatic. The cemetery was small and they needed the burial sites. I went into the little house. I read the messages on the skulls, another way of honoring loved ones.

### **Conclusions**

Yes, life is too short, it is painful, but it is also beautiful. I feel gratitude this week for having experienced life and death with people I love. One of my favorite ministers in our denomination is the Rev. David Rankin. David tells this beautiful story:

She stared out the window and smiled.

Miss Sweeney was almost gone. A wisp of white hair, two brown eyes, small thin lips, and a quivering body were all that remained.

She stared out the window and smiled.

After 48 years of teaching--and 87 years of life--and six years paralyzed from the neck down--Miss Sweeney seemed to be part of another world.

She stared out the window and smiled.

Miss Sweeney was tied to the bed. She could no longer speak an intelligible word, or move her head from side to side, or even chew her food.

She stared out the window and smiled.

After she died, I returned to her room to collect her belongings. From the bed I could see the expanse of sky and the single limb of a tree. A robin was nesting in Miss Sweeney's world.

I stared out the window and smiled. (p. 14, "Portraits from the Cross')

This is how I felt when I have been with a family after a death.. A family had experienced the most difficult of life's sorrows--the death of a loved one in the middle of the night. I remember the experience like it was a spring morning, like yesterday. I had a doctor's appointment early in the morning. I went into the office about 9:30. The secretary said there was a stack of messages on my desk. I might want to look at the top one right away.

The message read: "My mother died this morning. She is upstairs in the hallway. Please come. Eva." I went immediately and there was her mother on the floor. I said, "You have to call a doctor, then a funeral home." I was glad she didn't call 911. The doctor came and did his job. Time of death: 10:30 a.m. Then the Funeral Director came and together we carried Eva's mother down the stairs and into the hearse.

Afterwards, we sat in the living room and talked about Eva's mother and began planning a memorial service. Her mother seemed so healthy. They all thought she would live on. We all want our loved ones to live forever. But it just doesn't happen that way. We are born. We live. We die. We live a good life because virtue is its own reward.

There we all stood looking out the window and the birds kept on making their noises, eating their food, making life a little more cheerful. We looked out the window and smiled.

Yes, Pete, I can't promise you eternal life in heaven. I can only promise you a struggle with life while you are here. I can promise you some joy and some sorrow. You make of life what you will. I only ask you to stop and enjoy the journey, stare out the window and smile. We have much to be grateful for, here and now.

Yes, David Rankin, you are right:

A religion that promises a life without tension. life without conflict, life without suffering--is a religion of passivity, a religion of mediocrity, a religion of insignificance. Besides, everything worth doing in the world is a desperate gamble, a game of chance, where nothing is certain. . . . If I refuse to play the game, if I refuse to risk myself, if I refuse to throw the dice, I am never really alive. I am then only flesh, baking in the sun on a middling plateau--with no view of the valley and no road to the peak. (p. 29)

I am sorry, Pete, if I upset you that hot summer day. I gave you my belief as it is--the way I see life. May we all find the peaks and the valleys and when we come to die may we say: "We lived a good life." May virtue be its own reward. Thank you.