

ADVENT SERMON SERIES
FROM HEAVEN ABOVE
(6) THE GIFT OF LIFE

Isaiah 38:17-20

Romans 6:20-23

John 1:1-5

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(with material from Dean Nadasdy, used by permission)

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SCRIPTURE

Behold, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness; but in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction, for you have cast all my sins behind your back. For Sheol does not thank you; death does not praise you; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness. The living, the living, he thanks you, as I do this day; the father makes known to the children your faithfulness. The Lord will save me, and we will play my music on stringed instruments all the days of our lives, at the house of the Lord (Isaiah 38:17-20 ESV).

For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:20-23 ESV).

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it (John 1:1-5 NRSV).

MESSAGE

How do you discover the story of your life? What is the meaning of life? What's it all about?

In Douglas Adams' science fiction series *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*,

researchers who look like mice construct Deep Thought, the second greatest computer of all time and space, to calculate the answer to the Ultimate Question about Life, the Universe, and Everything. After seven and a half million years of pondering the question, Deep Thought provides the answer: "forty-two".

"Forty-two!" yelled Loonquawl. "Is that all you've got to show for seven and a half million years' work?"

"I checked it very thoroughly," said the computer, "and that quite definitely is the answer. I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you've never actually known what the question is."

Perhaps you are one of those persons who is asking, "What is the purpose of life?" Maybe you have even been disappointed in some of the answers you have received. It may be that Deep Thought (computer mentioned earlier) was correct in one respect: you need to be clear about what you are asking.

Little Billy came into the house and asked, "Mom, where did I come from?" His mother heaved a heavy sigh and then nervously began to explain the birds and the bees to her young son. When she finished she asked, "Now do you know where you come from, Billy?" But Billy shrugged his shoulders and said, "Not exactly. My friend Paul told me he was from Ohio and I just wanted to know where I'm from."

What is the meaning of life?

Charles Coulson has written about a Nazi concentration camp in Hungary during the Second World War where the prisoners were forced to work in a stench-laden factory that distilled human waste and garbage into a fuel additive for military use. One day the factory was bombed and destroyed. The next morning the prisoners were given a new job: move a pile of sand from one end of the compound to the other end. The next day the job was repeated in reverse. In fact, day after day they had to move the same pile of sand from one end to the other. It was a pointless job and it soon had a macabre effect. Prisoners went insane, cried uncontrollably or threw themselves into the electrified fence.

There is a gruesome lesson to be gained from this. Human beings will cling to life so long as they believe their work has purpose even if that purpose aids their enemies. But labor without meaning crushes the mind and spirit. Natural science can explain why human beings work to survive but cannot explain why we have to have purpose. The hunger for purpose only makes sense if human beings are a reflection of a purposeful Creator.

Long ago the Psalmist declared:

“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor” (Psalms 8:3-5 NRSV).

Each and every human being is created by God. Every human being is made in the image of God. We are crowned with dignity and bestowed with infinite worth. We are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalms 139:14). We have a purposeful origin and a purposeful destiny. And the fact that we are created by God means we are related to God and it is in that relationship we find the meaning of our existence. Over the years this has been expressed in many different ways but perhaps the most enduring is this: the purpose of humanity is to glorify God and enjoy him forever (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q.1.).

Life is a precious gift. Every living thing finds its life in the Spirit of God who has breathed its life into it. That breath of life animates everything from an ant to a plant to a cow to a human being. It has been that way since the beginning of creation. God is not just a creator but a life-giver.

In a fallen world infected with sin, though, life is anything but eternal. With the onset of winter in many parts of the world, the reality of death is all around us. The life God breathes into every one of his creations only lasts a short time. American poet Robert Frost put it this way:

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.¹

It is somehow fitting that Christmas should come at the start of bleak winter and its season of dying. Experience reminds us why Jesus came. As hard as a tree may strive to hold its

¹From The Poetry of Robert Frost, Edward Connery Lathem, ed. Henry Holt and Company, 1969.

leaves, death will have its way. As perseverant as an old dog may be to cling tenaciously to life, death will have its way. As hard as an old soul struggles to stay a while longer with friends and family, the breath of life received from God is exhaled one last time. Eden's grief becomes ours again.

We sometimes forget what Jesus was up against. It wasn't just sin, but the consequence of sin. "The wages of sin is death," the Bible tells us (Romans 6:23). Old souls – and young – die because sin takes them there. And it wasn't just death Jesus faced, but the devil who held the power of death over our lives. As Hebrews puts it:

"Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil" (Hebrew 2:14).

Death was Jesus' ultimate enemy. So an eighth grader in Bible study asks the insightful question, "But why did Jesus have to die? Why couldn't he just have gotten a really bad headache?" The answer? Jesus had to die because the only way he could conquer death was to go headlong into it and then come back to life again. So if someone asked Jesus why he had been sent by his Father, if someone asked Jesus for his personal mission statement, this is what he would say, "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

So Mary's baby, God's own Son, grew up to defeat death single-handedly. Destined for a cross from the fall in Eden, he came, he died, he rose, and he conquered! The result? Eternal life for all who place their trust in him!

When you opened your gifts this Christmas, your heart no doubt soared as you got just what you wanted or just what you needed. If you can pause for a moment, though, and focus on the little one in the manger, even for just a few seconds, it will come to you - the greatest gift of all is the one he gives me, the gift of eternal life! Then with joy and gratitude you can fill an old Hebrew phrase with enough meaning for eternity: "L'Chaim! To life!"