

Preached at Grace Church on November 10, 2013

Job 19:23-27a

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Luke 20:27-38

When I was in college in Williamsburg, Virginia, some friends of mine introduced me to a traditional type of religious American folk music. It's called shape note singing – named after the fact that the notes are different shapes: circles, triangles, squares, and diamonds, to make it easier to sight-read.

I love shape note music and I love to go to “practices”, which is the name for all-day singing sessions. They're called “practices” because at them we practice for the eternal music we will sing when we join the choir of saints and angels in heaven. And that's a huge preoccupation with these songs – death, and eternal life.

I'm always struck when I go to a shape note sing by just how much time we spend singing about death and leaving this world, which is usually described as a hard, sinful, cruel world. One of the more famous songs from this tradition you may know – it was made popular when I was in school by the movie “Oh Brother Where Art Thou”. It's called “Wayfaring Stranger” and the first verse begins like this:

I am a poor wayfaring stranger,
Journeying through this world of woe
Yet, there's no sickness, toil, nor danger,
In that bright land to which I go.

I love this song. And it makes me think of some of the songs we sang during some of the services last week on All Saints' Sunday, when we sang about those saints of the Church who have died before us, and whom we will one day join in the nearer Presence of God.

And yet I have some mixed feelings when I sing a song like Wayfaring Stranger, and sing about hoping and waiting to end my life on earth – “this world of woe”, as the song puts it.

Because I really love the world. I think it's beautiful, and full of love, and fun, and filled with the holiness of God its Creator.

This world is also a place with darkness, pain, suffering, and loss. And yet that suffering doesn't generally make me want to leave Earth. It more makes me yearn for the world to be freed from these sufferings and pain.

We can find language about the world as a place of suffering that we want to escape in other religions than Christianity. I notice this especially in Buddhism, which identifies life in the physical world as the source of suffering. And the world is difficult to escape because people reincarnate back onto earth over and over again. And so in Buddhism people seek

enlightenment, which is a complete escape from earthly life and suffering into a totally separate, purely spiritual plane.

That has always actually been the hardest thing for me to understand about Buddhism. Because for me, personally, the idea of staying forever on this beautiful, holy earth, is quite appealing.

In Christianity, too, there are streams of thought, such as some of the language I found in shape note music, that also focus on an escape from the physical world. I think it's a common understanding of heaven among Christians today – the idea that when we die we escape the physical world and our souls live forever in a separate, purely spiritual place.

But that is not the image of eternal life that we find in our Scripture passages today.

From the Book of Job today we hear a passage that seems particularly prophetic from a man born centuries before we began to speak of Jesus as our Redeemer. Job says,

“I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he shall stand *upon the earth*; and after my skin has been thus destroyed then *in my flesh* I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and *my eyes shall behold.*”

When Job speaks about what will happen at the last – at the end of time – he is not talking about an escape from Earth. Job suffers great physical calamities in his own life, and yet he hopes for a redemption that will take place upon the earth, with him standing in his own flesh and blood body, seeing God with his own eyes.

This seems like quite a different afterlife than an eternal escape from earth. Job, despite all the challenges and pains of life on earth, does not hope to escape to a separate, spiritual plane. He hopes for a physical world that is redeemed.

And this is the hope which we speak of in the Nicene Creed as “the Resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come”. Or “the resurrection of the body” as the Apostles’ Creed puts it.

In Scripture and in the Christian tradition we find clear passages of hope and prophecy for an eternal life that is physical – material, not only spiritual. We hear throughout the Bible language of love for this physical world that God created as good, and that we love as good – in the people around us and in the natural world. A world we love despite the sufferings we may also find here.

One of, I think, the most beautiful passages in Scripture describing a love for the world and a hope for a physical, earthly eternal life is found in Revelation 21:2-4, where St. John says,

“And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God Himself will be with them; and he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

This vision of St. John’s speaks of a uniting of heaven and earth. It speaks of spiritual closeness with God and an end of suffering, as we think of in heaven. But also it says that at the end of the age, when the generations that may come after us have also lived out their earthly lives, at the end of time there will come the moment when our souls return to the physical world God has created and to the bodies God has given to us.

This physical world is an essential part of how we as humans experience life and God.

The physical world is also essential to how God has experienced Himself – because astonishingly God came and lived among us as a physical person – Jesus Christ.

And the physical world is essential to the earliest source of the Christian hope of life after death – that is, the physical Resurrection of Jesus Christ himself. The Empty Tomb, which was empty because Jesus in his own body walked out of it.

I know a priest who expresses it in this way: he says “Matter matters.” Physical stuff matters. Because it is through physical things that we experience life and God. God made us to be physical beings in relationship with Him.

We are more than just spirits cruising around temporarily in bodies that are some kind of physical vehicle. Our bodies are actually part of us. They are an essential part of how God made us when he “knit us together in the womb” as Psalm 139 puts it.

Matter matters. The physical world is what God in his goodness made at the beginning and called good. This life on earth that – hopefully! – we love is good, and is not something we should be eager to end or to escape. Rather, we receive life as a gift, and can seek to use it to serve and give praise to God.

And when we do come face to face with suffering and with death, we can rest in the hope that that is not the end at all, and that suffering and death will come to an end, and God intends to remake this world anew and perfect.

But of course, speaking about a physical resurrection and a physical eternal life begs a lot of questions. Logistically, how would that work? How does it make sense? How, for instance, would everyone who has ever lived fit on earth together? Or, the angle that the Sadducees take in today’s reading from the Gospel – how do you sort out relationships that change at

death? What if a woman marries and then remarries 6 more times? The Sadducees want to know – “How’s that going to work, Jesus?”

The Sadducees may just be trying to trap Jesus and make him look ridiculous for speaking about such a difficult-to-comprehend topic as resurrection and eternal life. The Sadducees themselves did not believe in resurrection, unlike both Christians and Pharisees. And Sadducees generally believed in no spiritual existence, no consciousness, after death.

But maybe these Sadducees were genuinely curious. As we ourselves may be!

In today’s Gospel reading Jesus does not give us a complete account of the logistics of resurrection and eternal life on earth. He gives a few glimpses – there is no more death. There is no more new marriage and childbearing, which makes sense if we are talking about an eternity made up of people who have already lived once and been resurrected. There will still be relationships, we will be with each other again, but there will be differences in what these relationships are like.

Jesus, perhaps frustratingly, never explains all the differences or all the logistics. What he does give us is a glimpse, and a hope. He gives us a chance to believe, to imagine a little with the eyes of faith what the joy of eternity must be like.

But we are left only with tantalizing hints, not full explanations. And I think this is right. Without the full picture, it is hard to be totally preoccupied with life after death. It helps us keep our thoughts on the world and the people around us who need our help, and our love, and our message of hope right now.

There is a limit to how much we can speculate about the afterlife with the information we have, and so, while we hope for the future, we are led to focus for now on our life here, our relationships with God and with each other now, and on the ministry we are called to here on earth now - a ministry that is really important, just as Jesus’ own ministry on earth was (and through us, continues to be!) important.

And so as we minister together here, we can seek to rest in trusting God about the future. Trusting that God, who made the planets move in their orbits, who made this physical world full of living things that exist in a spectacular balance of organisms growing and interacting, living and dying and continuing in a cycle through thousands of generations. This Creator God, can remake a physical world that will work in new ways, without suffering and death. In a new eternal life that is different, but in which we will still rejoice in the joy of the physical world that our good God created.

Amen.