

**Questions of the Cross:  
LIFE**

**Matthew 16:13-25**

*How can the Cross give life?*

A sermon preached by  
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When I was in college and living in the dorm, we often had discussions that lasted far into the night. Some called these “bull sessions”; I preferred the term “philosophical inquiries.” Several of us who were taking philosophy and religion courses would get deep in the weeds about any number of issues. One of the traditional questions of philosophy and dorm discussion is, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” Why is there a world and life instead of just a void? Philosophers call this the existential question. If you think about it, life and existence are mysterious things. Why are we even here?

If you think about the mysterious nature of existence, you also have to acknowledge the possibility of no existence at all. There could be nothing instead of something. This leads you to see the world and life as a gift. You don’t have to focus on the deficits and shortcomings of existence; the fact that we are even here is a blessing, if not a miracle. This realization leads to a sense of gratitude, wonder, and awe surrounding all of life. If you are a person of faith, the reality of existence can be attributed to a creating God who provides everything we need for life.

Sam Wells pursues several meanings of the word “life.” Life can mean the reality of existence—all the biological processes going on at any given time. Life can mean simply the biological processes going on with any particular organism. A snail is alive; a person in a coma is alive. But life in the best sense is much more than that, isn’t it? Wells says, “Life also means really living, unconstrained, free, in our prime, creative, flourishing, vibrant. ...life means a time well-lived, capacities extended to the utmost, athleticism, intelligence, virtue, artistry, inventions that dazzle and

stretch the possibility of planet and species.”<sup>1</sup> It’s what the Bible calls life abundant and eternal. We want that kind of life!

Our artist friend Scott Erickson who was here last week did an amazing presentation downtown last Sunday night, and one of his themes was living life well. One of his images was the 1946 film, “It’s a Wonderful Life,” starring James Stewart and Donna Reed. Stewart plays George Bailey, a good man frustrated by his small town and his lack of accomplishments. One Christmas everything seems to come crashing down on him, and the final straw is \$8,000 that goes missing from his Savings and Loan business. George thinks about ending his life, but then he is saved by Clarence, his guardian angel.

Still George has despaired of his life, and he wishes out loud that he had never been born. Clarence, being an angel, grants his wish, and George gets to see what the world would be like if he had never existed. His town of Bedford Falls was full of crime and vice; his friends were hateful and violent; his wife was an old maid; his children didn’t exist. And because George had not been around to save his brother from drowning in their childhood, his brother never grew up to be a war hero and hundreds more soldiers died. Realizing the impact of his non-existence, George pleads for a second chance: “I want to live! Please, God, let me live!” Which God does, because it’s wonderful to have life.

The flip side of the existential question is, “Why then is there death?” If life is so wonderful, why don’t we just keep on living? But we don’t. We all die. Prior to death, we all spend most of our life trying to avoid or deny that reality. We stay busy with career and hobbies. We keep ourselves

entertained. We hope that if we accumulate enough wealth and take enough medicine and say enough prayers and have a little luck, we just might escape having to die. But we don't. And we utter the dumbest complaint that ever comes from human lips, and it comes from most of us at some point: "Why me?"

Our Scripture today is perhaps familiar; it's the confession of Peter on the road to Caesarea Philippi. Jesus is curious about what people are saying about him. The disciples tell him what others are saying: John the Baptist, Elijah, or another prophet come to life. Then Jesus says, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter blurted out, "*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!*"<sup>2</sup> It is a watershed moment, the first time the disciples have articulated the identity of Jesus. In Matthew, Jesus praises Peter and gives the justification for the primacy of Peter in the church as it developed later: "*You are Peter, and on this rock (petra) I will build my church.*"<sup>3</sup>

I have preached on this text a few times. I have always focused on the confession of Peter. This is an important scene in the Gospel. Those were good sermons. But today I want to focus on what happened after Peter's confession. Now that they understood who Jesus was, he began to explain the implications of that confession: "*Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*"<sup>4</sup>

This was the last thing Peter wanted to hear. He had just confessed that Jesus was the Christ, and Jesus tells him that he is going to die? "*Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never*

*happen to you.*”<sup>5</sup> Do you see what’s going on here? Peter is avoiding death like we do. The Messiah can’t die! We don’t even think we ought to die, but certainly not the Son of God! This is an exercise in denial.

And it earns the rebuke of Jesus: “*He turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’*”<sup>6</sup>

Ever since that moment, Christian theology has been trying to make sense out of the death of Jesus. These exercises are called theories of atonement. As early as the Letter to the Romans, Paul says, “*since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.*”<sup>7</sup> Some believed Jesus was a human sacrifice, given by God to make reparations for sin that was so deep that grain and sheep and bulls couldn’t satisfy God. Or maybe it was that Jesus was a ransom paid by God to Satan, because sin had put Satan in control of the earth, but death could not hold Jesus, so sin was redeemed in the end. And those are the simple theories!

Sam Wells suggests that the common denominator of all the atonement theories is that they all take Peter’s side. They all try to make the death of Jesus OK, like his death was part of some divine plan—“all orchestrated and comprehensible and appropriate.”<sup>8</sup> Maybe God didn’t send Jesus to die. Maybe God sent Jesus to show us how to live life to its fullest: “*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*”<sup>9</sup> But sinful humanity took Jesus’ life

because they could. It was the total failure of human goodness, a tragic display of just how awful we can be. It was horrible and gruesome and not God's original will. They call it Good Friday, but there was really nothing good about that day.

But then, the death of Jesus becomes the revelation of God's truth and love and power. Because God takes the tragic death of his Son and turns it into the pivotal moment of his story and our story. He brings good out of evil, triumph out of tragedy, life out of death. And that's the story into which we are invited.

So what is our response to the Messiah who dies? Immediately after rebuking Peter, Jesus turns and says to the other disciples, "*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*"<sup>10</sup> This is our path. If we face the evil, sin, and death of this world with love and courage and goodness, we will bear the cross. Bearing the cross, we will be next to Jesus. Our response is to let go of life and hold on to Jesus.

The spiritual giants of the faith have all discovered this truth at some level. Malcolm Muggeridge, the British writer, journalist, and late-in-life advocate for Christianity, said, "I can say that I never knew what joy was like until I gave up pursuing happiness, or cared to live until I chose to die. For these two discoveries I am beholden to Jesus."<sup>11</sup>

Thomas a Kempis, the medieval writer of *The Imitation of Christ*, a devotional book that influenced Wesley and is still read today, said, "Look, it all consists in the cross, and it all

lies in dying; and there is no other way to life and true peace within.”<sup>12</sup>

Last Sunday night, Scott the Painter invited us into a “conversation with your eventual disappearance.” He began by naming all the things in his life that he loves and had to let go of—favorite foods, friends, family, music—not that he cut himself off from these good things, but that he released their hold on his life. The place we want to get to is to say yes to the mystery and the miracle of life that God has put inside of us. But first we have to let life go.

Sam Wells draws his chapter to a close with these words: “You can’t cling on to life. It’ll sooner or later slip through your hands. Let go of life. You can’t keep it. Instead, hold on to Jesus. Let him take you by the hand and lead you through the streets of suffering, pain, hardship, and death. He’ll show you something better than life. Jesus didn’t want to die. He was frightened just as you and I are. But he walked towards Jerusalem and he walked towards Calvary because he was crafting a path for us through death to something better than life. The alternative to that something is nothing. And the only way towards that something is to take his hand, to reel in that thread, so that we are no longer hanging by a thread, but holding on to Jesus.”<sup>13</sup>

Thomas A. Dorsey was known as the “father of black gospel music,” but his songs have been recorded by everyone from Elvis Presley to Aretha Franklin. His most famous hymn came out of a tragic time in his life. In 1932, Dorsey was leading a worship service at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Chicago, when a man came on to the stage and gave Dorsey a telegram that said, “Your wife Nettie has died giving birth.” Dorsey left the service and hurried home,

only to find that the baby had also died shortly after his mother. Suddenly Thomas was bearing his cross. His own life and faith and sanity were hanging by a thread. At a friend's house a few days later, Dorsey felt a peace that the world cannot give. He began to sing words that came from the mouth of the Holy Spirit: "Precious Lord, take my hand; Lead me on, let me stand. I am tired, I am weak, I am worn. Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light. Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home."<sup>14</sup>

There is no way to avoid death, even tragedy, in our lives. Jesus, the very Son of God, didn't. Why should we expect any different? But there is a way to overcome death. There is a way to live life abundantly now and eternally forever. We have to hold on to Jesus. If you are tired and weak and worn or grieving or sad or hurt or depressed or anxious today, there is a way that leads to life. You will find it in Jesus. You will see it in the cross.

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<sup>1</sup> Wells, 32.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 16:16.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 16:18.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 16:21.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 16:22.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 16:23.

<sup>7</sup> Romans 3:23-25.

<sup>8</sup> Wells, 34.

<sup>9</sup> John 3:16.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 16:24-25.

<sup>11</sup> Malcolm Muggeridge, *PreachingToday.com*.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas a Kempis, *PreachingToday.com*.

<sup>13</sup> Wells, 35f.

<sup>14</sup> Wells, 36. *United Methodist Hymnal*, #474