

# **Stump the Preacher: What happens when we die?**

**John 14: 1-4**

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It was 15 years ago now, that my father died. He had a sudden and unexpected stroke and severe brain hemorrhage. Even though we might have expected something because of his truly unhealthy lifestyle, it still caught us all off-guard, and so the grief was deep and heart-wrenching. There is something about a sudden death that can make you feel like the world has been pulled out from under your feet. It can make you feel anxious: because if something that unexpected and random can occur, what else might happen?

But the feeling that stayed with me the longest, after my father died, was worry. I was worried about him, because I didn't know where he was. I didn't know what had happened to him. Not his body, I knew that well enough. I didn't know what had happened to HIM, what made him, him.

He had known, in many ways, a hard life. Brought up without a lot of attention, affection or love, he had also known the same kind of stunning grief when his wife, my mother, died young, leaving him with three young children to raise. So I worried, and wondered about what happened to all of that, when he died. What happened to the grief, and anger, and loss, and hurt? Did they all just melt away, leaving only the core of who he was, to return to God? Or, did he have to do some work on it all, with God, some spiritual work of healing and letting go and forgiving and receiving forgiveness?

I'm telling you all this because of the questions I'm exploring today, in our "Stump the Preacher" sermon series. The questions are, "What happens when we die? And how do we cope with the death of people we love, and our own death, when it arises?"

There's something about a question about death that drives you to reflect on your own experience, isn't there? Because of course, on the face of it, it's not easy or even possible to answer the first question, about what happens when we die. The only people who know can't tell us the answer. Yet that hasn't stopped us, human beings, from being fascinated with the question, wondering and proposing all kinds of answers to the question of death, seeking to find meaning in the end of life. From ancient times, the human creature has imagined that the end of our life is not really the end, that there is some kind of afterlife to look forward to, to give our all too short lives deeper meaning.

As Christians, we look for meaning in our Scriptures, as well as in our own experience, and in the tradition of the church. The earliest writings in the Hebrew Scripture, the Old Testament, had no belief in an afterlife where you were rewarded for living a righteous life or punished for living a wicked one. In ancient Israelite belief, if you lived righteously, God would reward you in this life, with prosperity and the blessing of children. When you died and were buried, you simply went to Sheol, a shadowy place where you "slept" with your ancestors.

It would not be forever, though: the Jewish belief was that when the kingdom of God, “the world to come” would arrive, then all those who had died and were sleeping in Sheol, would be raised, in one great general resurrection. But until then, the meaning in life was found in the life you lived, in the times and blessings that were given to you.

It was once the Jewish people were taken into exile, that they were exposed to the beliefs of the Persian people, including a life after death. Yet even in Judaism today, there is not a fully developed doctrine about life after death. While Jews believe that death is not the end of our existence, there is much more focus on how to live life in the here and now, than there is on what happens after death.

In the Christian tradition, a much more developed belief system grew, based on the concept of reward for goodness, and punishment for wickedness. By the middle ages, the Roman Catholic Church (the one, unified Christian Church) had developed the idea of heaven for the righteous, hell for the wicked, and purgatory, a process of purification. Since very few people were perfect, the expectation was that most people would spend some time in purgatory after their death, undergoing some suffering as their souls were cleansed so they would be pure enough to enter heaven. So funerals, and the work of grieving and remembering the dead, involved praying for the person’s soul, for God to bless the dead and shorten their time of suffering in purgatory.

Yet by the 1500’s, the doctrine of purgatory had led to corruption in the church. Those who were rich were offered the chance to “buy off” some of their future time in purgatory by making a large donation to the church (called an “indulgence”). Grieving people were encouraged to do the same to shorten the time their dead loved ones would spend in purgatory. These and other abuses led people like Martin Luther and John Calvin to protest against the church they knew and loved, hoping to reform it. It didn’t work, and they both ended up leaving the Roman Catholic Church and starting new churches, Protestant churches.

The Protestant reformers rejected the idea of purgatory, and the need to earn forgiveness by a time of suffering and purification before entering heaven. They stressed God’s unconditional love and grace, that did not need to be earned, nor could be earned, but was freely given and freely accepted. So the work of grieving for those who you loved, at their death, was no longer about praying for their souls, but rather remembering and giving thanks for their life, striving to follow their example, and assuming that they had entered into heaven.

Which brings us to “heaven.” Now there’s a word with a lot of meanings packed into it! If you look at popular culture, the word heaven conjures up: what? Pearly gate with St. Peter at the door, checking “the book” to see who’s allowed in and who gets sent the other way. Angels, or rather, people in long white robes with wings playing harps, float serenely around or sit limply on clouds. Sound familiar?

I’d love to know where this image comes from, because it sure isn’t scripture. In fact, there is very little information given at all in the Bible, about what happens when we die. Jesus talks a lot about “the kingdom of heaven” in the gospel of Matthew, but he was really talking

about the kingdom of God, the time when God would bring the new heavens and the new earth, not about some afterlife.

Jesus does, though, talk about his impending death. He says that he is going to be with his Father. And in our reading today from the gospel of John, he promises that we also will be brought there, that there is room for each of us in that place in God, a place that Jesus has gone and prepared for us. It's no wonder that we often read this promise at memorial services. I know that when I was so worried about my dad, about where he was and how he was, to hear Jesus' promise that he was with him, with God, that there was a place prepared for him within God, was very comforting.

I was left wondering, though, whether my Dad would still exist in God as his own particular personality, or if he would just merge into the great love and life and energy of God. And I wondered, as I said earlier, what would happen to all the hurts and pains and angers of his spirit, and if he would have to sit down with God and explore them, feel them, receive healing and forgiveness, and be able to let them go, before he could join fully into God's being.

I know for many people, the thought of seeing their loved ones again, being reunited with those we have lost, is a powerful comfort at a time of loss. But it is not only a thought. Many people have tangible experiences of their loved ones after their death, through vivid dreams, through seeing them out of the corner of their eye or in a crowd, through hearing them speak, or through a strong sense of their presence. Many others have had near-death experiences which are remarkably consistent: going through some kind of tunnel toward a bright light, and seeing those they loved who have died, beckoning them onward. I myself once, when I was setting out on a long and scary journey by myself, in prayer had a strong sense of the presence of both my parents, one on either side of me, an almost tangible promise of their constant presence and love.

So, of course, I can't answer the first question, "What happens when we die?" None of us knows for sure where we go (or if we go anywhere at all), or how it happens, or who else is there. All I can offer in answer is what I cling to myself: the promise Jesus makes us, that he has gone before, back into the heart of God, and that he has made a place for us there too. That when we die, that is where we return, our lives flowing back into the one life that created us, that sustained us through our living and that now welcomes us home.

The more accessible or answerable question is the second one I was asked: how do we cope with the death of people we love, and our own? How do we go on, when we lose those most precious to us? Well, I think we have to grieve, to experience the loss and live through it, even with all its pain. We have to know that this grieving can take many forms and last a long time, longer sometimes than other people or our culture think it should. And we have to receive it when it comes, at different times of our lives when our loss seems to rise up within us again, long after we thought we had healed and "moved on". And we need to trust, if we can, that the ones we love are not lost, but found. That they have been found by God and are nestled deep in God's heart, in God's memory, in God's life and energy and love, and so are always around us and with us and in us.

As for us, for our own dying and death? What can we do to prepare for that, be ready for it, receive it gracefully when it comes, whenever it does come? I suppose that's the question of a lifetime, isn't it. In reflecting on the question of death, Barbara Brown Taylor wrote, "Since ecstatic union with God is my best idea of heaven, I think I have to be ready to let myself go – literally, I mean. I think I have to entertain the possibility that joining God in heaven may mean surrendering everything I hold dear on earth, including my me-ness, in order to be made entirely new. In Christian terms, I think I really do have to die, and be willing to leave the rest to God."

"I think I really do have to die, and be willing to leave the rest to God." Not a bad way to approach death. And actually, a pretty good and faithful way to approach life, as well. For I have noticed, in the dying and deaths that I have been privileged to accompany and witness, that often, a person dies the way the lived. So perhaps the best way we can prepare for our own death, is to practice living the way we want to die. With trust, with gratitude, with God's peace deep within, with surrender to God, with joy.

Perhaps, then, the questions posed by death are the ones that can mean the most to our life. If the reality of death can prod us into a richer living of our life and a deeper trust in God, then death indeed is nothing to be feared, but merely another gift to be received. May it be so for us. Amen.