



Westminster Presbyterian Church

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Evidence of Eastertide: Life

Scripture Lesson: Isaiah 66:1-13; John 3:1-8

It's not easy to talk about spiritual realities.

Even that phrase, "spiritual realities," invites a certain bafflement—maybe even an eye-rolling skepticism. (Or at least that's what the dementors we're whispering to me as I wrote this sermon, hissing, "They're going to think it's silly, that you're silly")

No it's not easy to talk about spiritual realities, because we don't have direct, shared, sensory experience of them, the way we do physical realities. So we have to talk about those spiritual realities in physical terms—and that's not easy.

It runs throughout the Bible; in particular, it's a running joke in John's Gospel. Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again, and Nicodemus, taking him literally, asks, "Er, how am I supposed to get back in my mother's womb?" In the next chapter, Jesus stops at a well for a drink, meets a Samaritan woman there, and offers her "living water, a spring of water gushing up to eternal life, so that you will never thirst again." Taking him literally, the woman cries out "Well, get me a bucket!" And so it goes throughout John's Gospel.

But just because they're difficult to talk about, doesn't mean spiritual realities aren't real or aren't important. They are. We know this. Take the reality of "life." Life is more than mere physical, biological existence. It certainly includes that, but it's also more than that. And we all know this.

There are situations, there are experiences—there are people, there are jobs, there are meetings, there are classes, there are relationships—that just suck the life right out of you. It's not the biological life that's getting sucked out of us—it's the spiritual. But it's revealing: we talk about this loss of spiritual life in physical terms. We all know the phrases: I'm dying here; this job is killing me, if I have to go to one more meeting, one more class—talk to this guy one more time, go through this rigamarole one more time . . . well, just shoot me now—*please*. Some experiences, if not quite the same as dying physically, are at least the spiritual and metaphorical equivalent.

Conversely, there are situations, there are experiences—there are people, there are jobs, there are meetings, there are classes, there are relationships—that give us life. It's not mere biological life we're being given—we already have that—it's spiritual. But it's revealing that again, we talk about this in physical terms: I feel alive again; feel like I'm a new person, like it's a new life. I can breathe—*again*.

Some experiences, if not quite the same as being born physically, are at least the spiritual and metaphorical equivalent.

Life is more than mere biological existence—that's what Jesus is telling Nicodemus: "Unless you are born again, you will not see the kingdom of God."

This way of speaking—figuratively, metaphorically, about spiritual realities—Jesus does it a lot: to Nicodemus, to the Samaritan woman at the well, and to many others. The life that he offers is *spiritual* life, life from from God, but he talks about it in physical terms. He says: “I am the bread of life come down from heaven to give life to the world,” and it baffles his listeners. And while that spiritual life certainly bears a close relationship to our physical and biological life, and certainly bears a strong resemblance to it (hence the metaphors), it’s not the same. It can’t be identified with, or reduced to it. The humor is that Nicodemus—a spiritual authority, no less—can’t see the difference.

But sympathy for Nicodemus: it’s not easy to talk about—much less, to grasp—spiritual realities; we have no direct, shared sensory experience of them. The life-sucking and the life-giving situations may be indistinguishable in merely physical terms—at least at first glance. Look a little closer, however, and you can see the differences: the body language, the posture, the expressions on the faces, and especially in the eyes—all tell the story. But still, these are only the physical manifestations of the spiritual realities—it’s much *more* difficult to talk about the spiritual realities themselves.

And there’s a further difficulty: religious words—words that point to those spiritual realities—are not only frequently misunderstood (because they’re taken literally) they’re also prone to get worn out, used up. Take being “born again,” for example. We’ve heard it used so many times—heard it used to cover up so much self-seeking chicanery and self-important silliness, that it invites . . . well, if not Nicodemus’ bafflement, then *our* eye-rolling skepticism. As I said, the original Greek also admits of the translation, “Unless you are born *from above* (or, ‘born anew’), you will not see the kingdom of God.” But let’s be honest, if we prefer that translation, it’s not because it captures the meaning better, but because it doesn’t seem so overused, misused, and worn out.

Other examples abound: Take the word, “martyr.” For most of us, “martyr” no longer means a brave and noble witness who suffers for the faith, but someone who exaggerates—even fabricates!—his or her own “noble” suffering in order to lord it over others. (“Don’t be such a martyr!”) Or that word, “noble”—now it’s almost always used ironically (as in, “How *noble* of you!”). And as for “lord” . . . well, now it’s only a proper name for God, if it has not fallen out of use altogether.

And so, if we are to begin to grasp spiritual realities, if we are to see the kingdom of God, we have to go back to the well, back to the living water. We have to hear those words again—anew—from above—as if for the first time. And we have to discover our own, new, words.

“Dementors”—if you caught my earlier reference—is one such attempt. “Dementors,” the discovery of J.K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter books—those soul-sucking, life-sucking vaporous, ghost-like creatures that sometimes flit/hover/lurk around us barely seen, but always felt—cold, cold, cold—you can feel the life being sucked right out of you. But J.K. Rowling also discovered Patronuses—a Patronus is a *good* spiritual being, it can be either bodily or non-bodily, can sometimes take the form of a thin wisp of silver, sometimes the shape of of an animal—but it’s job is always to protect us from dementors. “Expecto Patronum!” Is what you shout when you really, really need one—and what I shouted several times while writing this sermon (don’t worry, my neighbors are used to it).

In another, earlier day, we would have spoken of demons and guardian angels, and shouted, “Heaven, help me!”—but—alas!—those got used up.

And even if the metaphors aren’t misused and used up, even if they still illuminate something of the spiritual realities, they still fall short of the realities themselves—they certainly don’t illuminate every-

thing about them—and we feel it, or at least with time and use, we begin to feel their inadequacy. They're like the phrases, "I appreciate everything you've done for me," "thank you," and "I love you,"—they're said so often with so little meaning, that then, when you really mean them, when you really want to say them, when you really feel them, they sound so inadequate, or at least you feel they're inadequate—precisely because they have been so misused and overused.

All of which brings me to images of God in the Bible, particularly parental images of God, particularly maternal and paternal images of God—and Mother's Day is a good day to talk about them.

There **are** maternal images of God in the Bible, witness our first Scripture lesson, where God says:

*As a mother comforts her child,
so I will comfort you;
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.*

And that's not the only one. In Hosea, God says:

*It was I who taught you to walk,
I took you up in my arms;
I led you with cords of human kindness,
with bands of love.
I was to you like those
who lift infants to their cheeks.
I bent down to you and fed you.*

And Jesus, in Luke's Gospel, laments:

O Jerusalem! Jerusalem! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

As I said, images, metaphors—using physical terms to talk about spiritual realities—abound in the Bible, including images and metaphors for God. In the Bible, God is likened to an animal ("God is an eagle"), to a vegetable ("God is a vine") and to a mineral ("God is a rock"); in the book of Numbers, God is the mineral part of an animal ("God is the horns of a wild ox"); and in Deuteronomy, God is a maternal mineral: "God is the rock who gives us birth." Trust me, there are many, many more; I could go on.

Of course all these metaphors, including the maternal, as powerful and illuminating, as they may be, nonetheless fall short of the reality, the glory, of God. And, all of them can be—have been—overused and misused (for some, this is particularly true of male and paternal images of God). But what is remarkable about the Bible's images and metaphors is their fecundity, their ability to generate new meanings, the life have they have, the life they have given, and the life they continue to give.

Consider just three verses from Isaiah, two of which are in our first Scripture lesson:

*For thus says the Lord:
I will extend prosperity to Jerusalem like a river,
and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream;*

*You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice;
your bodies shall flourish like the grass;*

*For the Lord will come in fire,
and his chariots like the whirlwind.*

From later books in both the Old and New Testaments to the economist Adam Smith (“The Wealth of Nations”) to the African-American author James Baldwin (“The Fire Next Time”); from the poets Walt Whitman (“Observing a spear of summer grass, I see, dance, laugh, sing”), and Langston Hughes (“My soul has grown deep like the rivers”) to William Blake (“Bring me my chariot of fire!”) to two 1924 Olympic runners, to the 1981 Oscar-winning movie (Best Picture) about those two runners (I can still see them running down the beach to Vangelis’ “Chariots of Fire” theme (Best Original Score))—all of these (and, I’m sure, many more) from *just three verses*—the words seem inexhaustible—a well of living water, a spring of water, gushing up to eternal life.

And all that of course is the work of God in the person of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit—everywhere the giver and renewer of life—gives life to these words and thereby life to us. Life, life to hear those words again—anew—from above—as if for the first time.

So, in the Book of Isaiah, God metaphorically compares herself to a human mother:

*Can a woman forget her nursing child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?*

And then God takes it one step further:

*Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.*

What we want, what we need, is life, more life—not the life sucked out of us. *That* spiritual reality is real and important, more real and more important than anything else. What these metaphors promise us, what the Holy Spirit promises us, what Jesus’ resurrection promises us . . . is life. That God is life—the source of our life, the source of all life. As our mothers (and fathers) gave us life, so also—no, so even more so (“even these may forget yet I will not forget you”)—God gives life, life to us.

We want life—and we don’t want the life sucked out of us. What these metaphors, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus’ resurrection promise is that we will have it: we will be born again, anew, from above. And it’s already happening here and now.

Life—our God-given life—that is the evidence of Eastertide.

So on this Mothers’ Day, on any day really, but especially on Mothers’ Day, let us give thanks for *all* those who have given us life, but especially for our mothers, especially God:

“I appreciate everything you’ve done for me,” “Thank you,” “I love you.”

And if those words don’t seem adequate for what’s in our hearts? Well, say them anyway; trust the Holy Spirit: those words will have new life—and give us new life too.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.