

THE MIST OF LIFE

Sermon material by The Rev. Ralph W. Bayfield, D.Min.+, 9/26/21
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The global rampage of covid-19 has created a vast pool of genetic mutations from which the delta variant has already emerged. Five point eighty eight billion jabs of vaccine have been administered on the planet, yet less than 2 percent have been in low-income families. Fortunately, by doubling the amount of Pfizer vaccine donated to low-income countries, by setting an ambitious goal to have 70 per cent of the world's population vaccinated by this time next year, and by corralling other nations into the cause, it is hoped that covid-19 can be brought under control, in much the same way as smallpox, polio, malaria and HIV/AIDs have been shut down.¹

The tragedy is that most deaths from covid-19 in our country could have been prevented had the people taken the simple step to be vaccinated. The clergy among other caring professionals have been asked to encourage people to get vaccinated. If you have not already done so, *Get Vaccinated!*

We are dealing with life and death issues here, and that is the subject of our lesson from *James* today. We have been reading *James* for the last five weeks and today will be our last day with that book of the Bible for our Sunday, Epistle lesson. Ironically, the sentence that jumped out at me, and which is the subject of my sermon is a sentence that has been skipped over in our lectionary lessons: *James* 4:14 says: "What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes."

On the subject of life the great Russian author Boris Pasternak wrote in his work *Doctor Zhivago* : "To live life to the end is not a childish task."

¹ Gerson, Michael: *Bill Gates, Expect long difficult cover campaigns: Washington Post*, Friday, September 24, 2021, page A 21

However, in our Gospel from *Mark 9:30-37* last week, Jesus used the illustration of taking a little child in his arms, and said: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

When it comes to “questions” that are asked us, the questions of children cannot be outdone. For children ask questions like:

“Why isn’t God married?”

Then there is the perennial parent-stopper:

“What’s life all about?”

Saint James, in our Scripture passage says that our lives are not all that impressive or important. He insists that they are not much more than “mist”; they are here briefly and then silently and quickly, they are gone! This statement of *James* puts two important questions before us:

First: “What is life?” And Secondly: “What is life for?”

Nearly everyone has his or her own answer to the question: “What is life?”

Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), the Scottish historian - philosopher said,
“Life, a little gleam of time between two eternities.”

A French Proverb goes: “Life is an onion which one peels crying.”

Martin Buber (1878-1965) the Jewish philosopher noted for his little book, “*I and Thou*” wrote: “All life is meeting.”

Nikita Khrushchev (1894-1971), former Soviet premier declared:

“Life is short. Live it up.” (*New York Times*, 1958).

Actor Dustin Hoffman noted:

“Life is really a game and you must treat it as a game.” (*Playboy*, 1958).

The second question, “What is life for?”, is really much more important to us. Here again, many have given their opinions on the subject. Here are some:

Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), the first Prime Minister of an independent India said: “Life is like a game of cards. The hand that is dealt you represents determinism. The way you play it is free will.”

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) twentieth century premier theologian wrote:

“Life has no meaning except in terms of responsibility.”²

Erich Fromm (1900-1980), German-born American psychoanalyst, said: “There is no meaning to life except the meaning a person gives their life by the unfolding of their powers.”

Albert Camus (1913-1960), French existentialist, novelist and philosopher said, -

“If, after all, people cannot always make history have a meaning, they can always act so that their own lives have purpose.”

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), Russian novelist wrote: “The only significance of life consists in helping to establish the Kingdom of God.”

Brooke Onstead (born 1992-) 29 year old nurse at Westminster-Canterbury Residence, after bringing me my nightly medicine, answered my question about what she thought about life, replied:

“You never know what you are going to get,
but you have to play the hand you are dealt.”

² Niebuhr, Reinhold: *Faith and History*, Union Seminary, New York, 1949

What is life, and what is it for? *Plato* (c. 427-347 B.C.) said in the fourth century B..C. that : “Nothing in the affairs of men is worth worrying about.”³

This sounds something like what *James* might have maintained had he extended his thoughts on his “man as mist” theory. Yet the main thrust of the Bible disagrees with this thought. It tells us that we are important. The Old Testament seems to say; “Obey God and enjoy life.” The New Testament develops further and says: “Love God and each other, do good, be just, and look for your own final individual fulfillment through God’s promises culminating in His eternity!”

What is life? It is given by God and it returns to God. What is life for ? To find God, to love and enjoy God forever, and to care for one another as we live our way toward eternity!

What is life for? More than anything else “life” presents us with a choice to be made. That choice was captured by an ancient inscription that was found on a stone in North Africa. It reads:

“I, the Centurion of a Legion of Rome, serving in the desert of Libya, have learnt and pondered this truth: ‘There are in life but two things, Love and Power, and no one has both.’”⁴

³Seegmueller, Harold:Plato, quoted in *Canadian Papers*: 18th Sunday After Pentecost
Halifax, Nova Scotia, September 25,1988

⁴ Muggerridge, Malcolm :*The Infernal Grove* : Fontana, 1981 ed.

Life presents us with this choice: either to follow the spiritual request to love God and goodness and neighbor, or to chase after the worldly instinct to control, to have power over people (and God too if possible)!

If we choose the first, we choose humanities highest calling, our call to goodness, God's call to the best that we find in ourselves.

If we choose the latter, we aim low, too low! Malcolm Muggeridge writing in his memoirs, talks of this eternal choice that faces every man and woman born into this thing we call life:

“The saddest thing to me, in looking back on my life, has been to recall, not so much the wickedness I have been involved in, the cruel and selfish and egoistic things I have done, the hurt I have inflicted on those I loved - although all that is painful enough. What hurts most is the preference I have so often shown for what is inferior, tenth-rate, when first-rate was there for the having. Like a person who goes shopping , and comes back with cardboard shoes when they might have had leather, with dried fruit when they might have had fresh, with processed cheese when they might have had cheddar, with paper flowers when the primroses were out.”⁵

So too life and God are continually presenting us with a choice, a choice between good and evil, a choice between God and the gutter. Our Lord and our God urge us continually and daringly to choose the living God Who made and cares for each one of us eternally! *Amen.*

⁵ Muggeridge, Malcolm:*Chronicles of Wasted Time; Part 2, The Infernal Grove*, Fontana,1981 Ed,