

Sunday September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020  
Philippians 1:21-30

“Why Am I Here?”

I found a very fanciful story about the time when God created everything that speaks to our theme today. I thought you might all enjoy it. On the first day, God created the dog and said: 'Sit all day by the door of your house and bark at anyone who comes in or walks past. For this, I will give you a life span of twenty years.' The dog said: 'That's a long time to be barking. How about only ten years and I'll give you back the other ten?' So, God agreed.

On the second day, God created the monkey and said: 'Entertain people, do tricks, and make them laugh. For this, I'll give you a twenty-year life span.' The monkey said: 'Monkey tricks for twenty years? That's a pretty long time to perform. How about I give you back ten like the dog did?' And God agreed.

On the third day, God created the cow and said: 'You must go into the field with the farmer all day long and suffer under the sun, have calves and give milk to support the farmer's family. For this, I will give you a life span of sixty years...' The cow said: 'That's kind of a tough life you want me to live for sixty years. How about twenty and I'll give back the other forty?' And God agreed again.

On the fourth day, God created man and said: 'Eat, sleep, play, marry and enjoy your life. For this, I'll give you twenty years.'

But the man said: 'Only twenty years? Could you possibly give me my twenty, the forty the cow gave back, the ten the monkey gave back, and the ten the dog gave back; that makes eighty, okay?' 'Okay,' said God, 'You asked for it.' So that is why for our first twenty years we eat, sleep, play and enjoy ourselves. For the next forty years we slave in the sun to support our family. For the next ten years we do monkey tricks to entertain the grandchildren. And for the last ten years we sit on the front porch and bark at everyone.

“Why am I here?” “What is the purpose of my life?” Have you ever asked that question? Of course, you have. Laying in a hospital bed for days on end, too weak to do much else, I pondered this question often. My soul resonated with the heart ache of Ecclesiastes, which wallows in seeing life as nothing but vanity or most of our efforts as a waste of time. So why? What is the point?

Perhaps you are familiar with the very funny but odd novel entitled “The Hitchhikers Guide to the Universe. Author Douglas Adams creates in the story a great big super computer called “Deep Thought” which is tasked with coming up with the meaning of life which takes 7.5 million years to compute. When it is all through it reports that the answer is... wait for it...42. Of course, no one understands it, so they ask the computer to explain it and it responds that it will take millions more years to report back. Adams point by this, is that answering why is a futile pursuit.

But is it really? If it is so futile why do we undertake it with such gusto? Dr. Seuss gives us an interesting insight:

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If you'd never been born, then what would you be?  
You might be a fish or a toad in the tree.  
You might be a doorknob or three baked potatoes.  
Worse than all that, you might be a wasn't.  
A wasn't just isn't. He just isn't present.  
But you—you are you. Now isn't that pleasant?  
Today you are you, and it's truer than true  
That there's no one alive who is you-er than you.  
Shout loud, "I am lucky to be what I am!  
Thank goodness I'm not just a clam or a ham  
Or a dusty old jar of gooseberry jam.  
If I am what I am, and it's a great thing to be.  
If I say so myself, happy birthday to me!"

Why are we here? Well I would be remiss if I didn't conclude it because God wants us here. God has created us to be us and not somebody else. God has a purpose for us and that is to be a child of God, to have fellowship with God, to be God's woman or man here in this place, right now. We read in Genesis: "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness . . . God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. God blessed them."

All of us are a special creation of God; each of us is a blessing of God. We are more than a fish or a toad or a clam, we are the very image of God. Woman or man, young or old, happy or sad, we are here because God wants us to be here. We are here because God put us here. On the other hand, we may wonder at times what God has in mind with us. Humanity often doesn't seem so wonderful. Read the newspaper, turn on the TV. Human beings are as mixed up as they can be. Malcolm Muggeridge looked around and commented,

"Our time is probably the most degraded and unilluminated ever to come to pass on earth. Science and education have promised us a brave new world, but supermarkets, the rainbows ending at the nearest bingo hall, leisure burgeoning out in multitudinous shining TV aerials rising like dreaming spires into the sky, happiness in as many colors as there are pills, green and yellow and blue and red and shining white, many mansions of light and chromium ever upward."

Then we look at pictures of the effects of hurricanes and floods. People who have nothing left—no homes, no work, no hope. It is easy to find blame—New Orleans was a hedonistic city, there was environmental degradation, poor government, bad management. Yes, we can learn from disasters, and plenty, but what we need to learn too is our common humanity. We are human beings more alike than we are different. A familiar saying says,

"I looked at my brother through the telescope of criticism and said, 'How coarse my brother is'. I looked at my brother through the microscope of scorn and I said, 'How small my brother is'. I looked into the mirror of truth and I said, 'How like me my brother is'." Hear what Martin Luther says of our common humanity:

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“What good comes of man? He eats and drinks only the best bread, wine, beer, precious spices too. He excretes nothing but corruption, snot, sputum, matter, sweat, sores, pox, scruff, slough, discharge, pus, dung and urine. He clothes himself in satin and gold, spreads lice, nits, fleas and other vermin.” What a delightful picture from the father of the reformation? But the point is quite valid.

We often wonder who we are and why we are here. Dietrich Bonhoeffer raised the question, “Who am I?” from behind the walls of a Nazi prison. He considered the contradictory answers of others in light of what he saw himself to be. To others he appeared strong, serene, self-sufficient; to himself, sick, empty, weary. But in all this, his trembling faith affirmed, “Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O Lord, I am Thine.”

Even as we recognize our failings, we also hear God’s Word to us: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people . . . Once you were no people, but now you are God’s people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” While we were yet sinners, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. We are at the same time, saints and sinners, people who fall short of God’s intention and a righteous people for God.

St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians describes his predicament. “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two; my desire is to depart and be with Christ for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is necessary for you.”

Paul wondered what his purpose was, why was he still on earth when he wanted to be with the Lord. The answer he gives, “to live is Christ, to die is gain.” He recognized clearly that he was here for a purpose, for fellowship with God in his life and for eternal life. You are here for the same reason. You are God’s child and God’s image. You are here to bring others to a knowledge of the truth which is Jesus Christ and to glorify God in your life.

I imagine we were having a conversation and you were telling me how you knew an old man who said he was an atheist, and did not believe in the existence of God. In response, you told him, “You love nature and the beauty all around you; can’t you recognize the person who created this beautiful creation?” When he asked about God, you defined God as does John’s Gospel saying, “God is love.” That was a very good answer— St Augustine once defined God simply: “God is love and that is all you need to know about God.” And now you might tell me, this man is starting to ask questions.

It is often said that Christians are the only Bible the world will ever read. You can be a Bible for your friends and neighbors as they see your faith and life. We read in the newspaper recently how with the death of Billy Graham, the great crusades and rallies of the past century may not continue into the future. I am not sure that that is a bad thing at all. I think that the way to reach people today is in a quieter way, one-on-one, letting other people know we care about them and that God cares too.

Jim Wallis, the editor of *Sojourners* magazine, uses an excellent phrase for our day: “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.” We are the prophets and sages and witnesses today.

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We are the disciples and apostles to this community at this time. We are the chosen people of God for your neighborhood or apartment or school or golf course.

Sometimes it is older people who ask me the question, “Why am I here?” Often, I am asked this in the context of why they live on and on, when others are struck down in the prime of life. What would we say to someone who lived to the age of one hundred and one? I would hope they would have had an answer to the “Why?” It comes from our lesson today. So long as they have life and breath, they can pray.

Even when we can no longer teach Sunday school or serve church suppers or even contribute to the offering, we can pray. We can pray, and pray for the church and its pastors, for the sick and lonely, for those who were troubled and especially in these days, for children and young people. We maybe are willing, and even longing to go be with our Lord, but we also knew that so long as we are alive, we have a reason and purpose for living.

There was a group of tourists who were traveling through Europe visiting historical sites. They were impressed that so many small villages were the birthplaces of great artists, poets, composers, and political leaders. While the group was strolling through a particularly picturesque village, one of the tourists approached a man who was sitting in front of a building and asked, “Excuse me, were any great men or women born in this village?” The old man thought for a moment and replied, “No. Only great babies!”

The old man’s point is correct. No great men or woman are born that way. They are nurtured and taught and directed by God to achieving a potential far, far beyond what they were when they were born. All of us have a God given potential and opportunity to something great. Where you were born, who your parents are, what education you had, who your friends and family are” all combine as a recipe a God directed path.

Now to be honest. God doesn’t promise that following faithfully the path laid out for us will be easy. Being God’s witnesses may very well produce suffering. Paul says this is God’s doing too: “For God has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well—since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.”

We are struggling human beings. We do not have all the answers. Why should we be any different from St. Paul who admitted his own struggles. We are not called to know everything or be everything. It is enough to be who we are, the special child God created us to be. It is enough to believe and follow the Lord Jesus and to allow ourselves to be used to glorify God.

Be glad you are not a fish or a toad or a clam or a ham but the person God made you to be. “Who am I?” I am God’s Child. “Why am I here?” To be just who I am. Amen.

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**PASTORAL PRAYER:** God of ages, our Rock of ages, the one whose hand has led all the generations before us, we bow our hearts in gratitude for our rich heritage. Many of these past generations did not have the benefit of the wisdom of the ages on which to rely. Yet they were far from alone in the world, for they could rely on something better than the wisdom of previous human generations. They could rely on the God of the ages. Thanks be to you, O God, for you did not abandon them in their search for life's meaning and purpose. And thanks be to you, their search was not in vain. You gave them laws for their journey through the wilderness into a settled land. You sent prophets among them as they moved from the open country into crowded cities. Then, as scientists produced one revolution after another, you turned scientists into philosophers to warn us of the dangers of pursuing progress without regard for purpose; of seeking wealth without respect for wisdom; of increasing power without concern for justice; and improving technology without compassion for people.

You have taken great strides to warn us of the dangers facing us, but we have ignored your warnings. You dispatched prophets and apostles to remind us of the connection between love for you and love for your children. You made them partners with us in the gospel of reconciliation, but we have preferred to honour ourselves. We have praised partnership with our lips, but practiced individualism in our lives. Deliver us from our contentious ways and ambitious habits.

Restore our oneness with you that we might rediscover our oneness with our brothers and sisters in Christ and, indeed, with all of creation.

We are truly sorry, O God, for the damage we have done to your cause in the world. We have failed you and, as a consequence, we have failed our brothers and sisters. For this betrayal of you, of them, and of ourselves, we humbly beg your forgiveness. We ask you to renew in us the joy of our salvation. Grant us a fresh vision of our neighbours and ourselves as creatures fashioned in your image. Then, dear God, send us forth to perfect that image.