

Waiting to Inhale

John 20:19-31

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Church of the New Covenant

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This passage from the Gospel of John contains many important themes and questions, all of which have received extensive treatment in sermons, books, seminary papers and magazine articles. For today, I want to concentrate on a part of it that is often overlooked but which conveys the purpose behind everything else – not just in this passage, but the entire gospel.

“Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing *you may have life* in his name.”

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I read in a magazine this week about the American inventor and futurist, Raymond Kurzweil (“Stayin’ Alive” by Gary Wolf, *Wired*, April 2008, p 160ff). He is best known for some predictions he made which have come true: the demise of the Soviet Union, the ability of a computer to defeat the world’s greatest chess champion, the development of the internet, and the wide availability of pocket-sized devices that could function as telephones, scanners, and information retrieval devices.

Right now he is in a quest for immortality. “He takes 180 to 210 vitamin and mineral supplements a day, so many that he doesn’t have time to organize them all himself. So he’s hired a pill wrangler, who takes them out of their bottles and sorts them into daily doses, which he carries everywhere in plastic bags. Kurzweil also spends one day a week at a medical clinic, receiving intravenous longevity treatments.”

Mr. Kurzweil believes that fairly soon – between 2030 and 2050 – human beings will boldly go across a frontier more exotic than the American West or even the edge of another galaxy. Artificial Intelligence will evolve more and more rapidly, and eventually begin to develop on its own, to the point where a highly sophisticated computer will “awaken” – that is, become conscious.

This hypothesized event is called the *singularity* by futurists. “The first AIs [Artificial Intelligences] will be created, says [Mr. Kurzweil], as add-ons to human intelligence... AIs will help us see and hear better. They will give us better memories and help us fight disease.”

Some postulate that when the singularity is reached, the era of human beings will end. We will effectively become obsolete. “[However], the singularity won’t destroy us, Kurzweil says. Instead, it will immortalize us.”

According to those who hold this view (“singularitarians”), “immortality will arrive in stages. First, lifestyle and aggressive antiaging therapies will allow more people to approach the 125-year limit of the natural human lifespan. Meanwhile, advanced medical technology will begin to fix some of the underlying biological causes of aging, allowing this natural limit to be surpassed.

“Kurzweil predicts that by the early 2030s, most of our fallible internal organs will have been replaced by tiny robots. We'll have "eliminated the heart, lungs, red and white blood cells, platelets, pancreas, thyroid and all the hormone-producing organs, kidneys, bladder, liver, lower esophagus, stomach, small intestines, large intestines, and bowel. What we have left at this point is the skeleton, skin, sex organs, sensory organs, mouth and upper esophagus, and brain.”

“Finally, computers become so powerful that they can model human consciousness. This will permit us to download our personalities into non-biological substrates. When we cross this bridge, we become information. And then, as long as we maintain multiple copies of ourselves to protect against a system crash, we won't die.”

So Mr. Kurzweil is engaged in a wide array of practices to prolong his life. “If the singularity is going to render humans immortal by the middle of this century,” he says, “it would be a shame to die in the interim.”

His dream is that eventually, all this technology “will allow us to conquer death itself.”

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It is a natural thing for human beings to want to extend our lives. It is an instinct built into us. The will to live. The imperative to survive. It is inherent in every living thing, from the simplest paramecium to the amazingly complex homo sapiens. Humans, though not the largest or the toughest or the strongest creatures on earth, have developed ever more clever means to evade or defeat predators. We are finding ways to eliminate disease, improve cardio-vascular health, repair damaged organs, and calibrate nutrition: all to the reasonable end of prolonging and – hopefully – improving human life.

Immortality has always intrigued the human spirit. It has largely been the stuff of myths, in which certain heroes become immortal like the gods. It has been a component of old fairy tales and modern-day fantasy stories. There is something within us, which animates us, which motivates us to sustain it and ourselves, something that comes before us, manifests itself in us, as us, and flows on beyond us which we want never to lose.

It is life.

We know life is bigger than we are, but that we are an integral part of it. Isn't there some way that we can remain a part of it beyond the boundaries of birth and death, outside of the limitations of time?

Can we not be immortal?

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The Gospel makes promises to us about *eternal life*.

Is the Gospel about immortality? Is that what is meant by “eternal life”?

But Jesus died. He was not able, with an heroic display of power, to cause the nails to fly out of his hands and feet and then float magnificently down from the cross. He died on it. He was not immortal.

The Gospel is not about immortality. It is about eternal life, which is an entirely different concept.

Now, before I say one more word, I want to tell you that I do not have the final word on the meaning of “eternal life”. I do, however, see important clues in the Gospel of John about the larger dimension of the life for which God created us, from which we run away with weeping and gnashing of teeth, and into which Christ is inviting us once again.

The author of this gospel says, “These [things] are written ... so that you may have *life* in his name.” This is the central theme of the gospel, and it is stated again and again, as in this famous declaration: “For 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*.”

All of the sayings about life in John extend from what is said in the opening verses of the gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came to be. What has come into being in him was *life*, and the *life* was the light of all people.

The phrase “In the beginning” is, of course, an echo of the opening words of Genesis, the song of creation. This entity called the Word, which became Christ, is the action of God. It is the enactment of God’s will, which is to give the gift of life.

Word is action. God *said*, “Let there be light!” and God *said*, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures!” and God *said*, “Let us make humankind in our image!” -- and it was so. In the beginning, God brought into material form that which is the very essence of God. God gave the gift of life, the gift of breathing, eating, suffering, dying, healing and thriving.

On my way in this morning I heard on the radio a reflection by a young woman who has experienced the loss of two babies and the healthy birth of a baby girl. As she endured her losses, she searched for something to believe in. Here are her thoughts about what it means to be a living being.

Luck comes and goes. Merit, I guess, is relative. Even hope is not enough. In September 2007 I was again in a delivery room, again with prematurely ruptured membranes, again delivering a daughter too young to live. Hope, luck, good fortune: They were obviously meaningless. What mattered, what so obviously mattered, was biology. Our ordeals — my own body's failures to keep my daughter's alive — were simply, purely, biological.

My first daughter was her own kind of biology lesson, stunning in her loveliness. She was a miniature anatomy textbook: an illustration of pure muscle and bone, a perfect network of veins and arteries crossing limbs. Holding her, I realized I had never before touched a dead human body. Sleepless next to her, I marveled at my own body, pumping blood, taking in air. Even as I wept onto her chest, her body molded into mine, head weighted against my fingertips, hips nestled into the palm of my hand.

Nobody planned these deaths. I didn't earn them. They aren't bad luck or even accidents. They are simply the result of human bodies at work.

Belief did not come easily, but our bodies — mine and my daughters' — have brought me around. Now I believe: I believe in the biological complexities of human bodies. They break down and grow strong; their vital processes do not fail, and they do. I believe in the body's unpredictability and frailty, in its heartbreaking splendor.

My one living daughter is somehow a little sister, a big sister and yet an only child. Her body is gloriously alive. And every time I hold her — every time our bodies touch — I feel the strange and wonderful vitality that accompanies my new-found belief.

(“The Human Body’s Frailty and Splendor”, by Carole Chabries, *This I Believe*, NPR Mar 30, 2008)

This is not immortality, but it is *living*. It is this biological, mortal life that Christ has entered with us.

God gives life. God is eternal. God is life. Out of love God calls us into being to participate in God’s life. What John’s gospel is trying to tell us is that although humankind regularly abandons and even negates this life, in Christ the fullness of life in God has come to us again. That is what the Resurrection declares to us. “What has come into being in him was life.” Life as God intends it to be lived. Eternal life lived *bodily* every day in Christ.

Eternal life is not about how long we live; it is about *how* we live. Eternal life has nothing to do with whether medical advances and technological wizardry will be able to render the human being immortal. It has everything to do with living according to God’s

primal intent for humankind. That intent is embodied in Christ – the risen Christ – who gave us this commandment: “Love one another as I have loved you.”

Living the life God intends and which Christ restores is the creative action of loving one another as Christ does and loving the world as God does. We live it the nurturing of our fellowship and our faith as a congregation. We live it in the giving and receiving of care in times of sickness or distress, and in the celebration of one another’s joys. We live it in our prayer, our study, and the mutual upbuilding of our faith.

Even in the finitude of our earthly existence, we live according to the eternal life of God when we labor with our neighbors to address the needs of our community. We live it when we invite our neighbors to share in the love of Christ. We live it when hold up that love against economic injustice and against the brutal folly of war.

Christ came into the world as the giver of life. That is why it was so important for him to show himself to Thomas and say, “I don’t want you to miss out. Be not faithless, but believing.” Do not be without faith. Have faith in me, because without me you have no life at all. You might as well be a program in a computer somewhere. Have faith in me, and be not dead. *Be alive!*