
Abundant Life and the Eternal Now

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A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The Fourth Sunday of Easter

Jesus said, "I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly." -John 10:10

So: "Is there life after death?"

It's one of the great religious questions of all time. My reply has become one that others have certainly used. I answer, "The question is not whether there is life after death; the question is whether or not there is life before death."

Is there life *before* death? I will get to that in a moment.

Let me swing over to another, favorite, religious question. I am often asked it when I am introduced to a new group, or when I am leading a Bible Study, or when someone is putting together an icebreaker in a group of Christian people. "What is your favorite Bible verse?"

Oh, there are so many! Surely no one verse expresses all that I believe and feel about life. Almost every biblical passage is a favorite at some time or another.

Still, there is one verse, in today's gospel, which does seem to pop up in my soul more often than others. And, even during the most sentimental or hokey group sessions when the favorite bible verse question is asked, this particular verse springs up.

"I came that you might have life, and that you might have it abundantly."

My attraction to this verse started in high school, when I was involved in ministries that urged us to memorize biblical verses. That is a wonderful practice, by the way, the memorization of biblical verses-as long as you memorize the right ones!

The verse I held to, tightly in those days, had an easy number to remember it by. John Ten Ten (John 10:10). I paraphrase it so that it speaks to me personally: "I came that you might have life."

We have all heard plenty of reasons to believe in Jesus, from the most hideous and scary to the most beautiful. Everyone has their reasons to believe in Jesus. But, put quite simply, this is my reason: I believe in Jesus because I believe he brings me life.

I do not believe in Jesus simply as protection from something-say, like a fire insurance policy. I don't believe in Jesus because I am scared of going to hell. I don't even believe in Jesus because I am so convicted of my sin. I don't believe in

Jesus because he promises me life after death. I don't even believe in Jesus just because he was such holy man. All these things are true, by the way. I do believe Jesus saves me from hell and sin and death; and I do believe he was truly holy.

But for me, personally, the primary reason I follow Jesus is because I believe this verse, John 10:10. Jesus has really brought me *life*.

Jesus said, "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:9-10).

So, what is the life that Jesus brings us?

At a simple level, "life" is the opposite of "death." For much of our lives, this definition is all we need to know. When we come to decision points in our lives, the way of Jesus is the way of life. It's been the way of God since the beginning of history. "Choose life," said Moses to the Hebrews. "Choose life and not death."

We are tempted, throughout our lives, by risky behavior, by behavior which threatens our lives. Driving too fast. Drinking too much. Eating, smoking too much. The way of Jesus is to choose a larger life than the mere gluttony of the moment.

And we are tempted, throughout our lives, by behavior that threatens the lives of others. Not just physical behavior, but verbal and emotional behavior. Anger or rage towards those we love. Selfish squandering of resources when our neighbors have so little. The way of Jesus is not merely to choose life for ourselves, but to choose life for others, too. Who, in the world today, do we need to choose life for?

The thief steals and destroys those around him. Jesus brings abundant life to those around him.

But there is another level. For those of us who believe in life, who strive daily to choose the life-giving action over the deadly action, we know, sooner or later, that death does occur. Jesus said he came that we might have life and have it more abundantly.

But, sooner or later, we actually do die. We see others around us die, our dearly beloved friends and family. Does Jesus really continue to bring life to us? How can we believe that when death intrudes?

The answer goes against our simple level. The easy opposite (life versus death) is not true here. For Jesus, the opposite of "life" is not simply physical "death." People do die. People and projects, and hopes and dreams, do die in the kingdom that Jesus brings to us. How can we believe that Jesus brings us abundant life?

For me, the answer is about time. The answer is eternal life as opposed to everlasting life. There is a distinction between everlasting and eternal. "Everlasting" means, literally, a continuation forever. This conversation, this sermon, we might say, is going on forever. Now, it may be a perfectly good event that we wish would go on forever: this party, this love affair, this movie, this song.

But the life that Jesus brings us is not merely the continuation, forever, of something fun that we are experiencing right now. "Eternal" life is something else. "Eternal" refers to a life, a moment, that is outside time. Jesus brings us an "eternal life," that is outside the boundaries of time. When we are in the moment of life in Christ, we are in a moment that has no beginning or end, because it is outside our typical temporal structures.

This is the grace and truth that Jesus brings us. Not just something everlasting, as good as it might be, that keeps on going forever and ever. Jesus brings us a life that is eternal, outside time itself, and which reforms our very outlook on the world. It is not merely life after death; it is life before death. Life that is now.

Paul Tillich, the great theologian of the mid-twentieth century called this sort of life "the eternal now." *The Eternal Now* became the title of a book of his sermons, published in 1963. In the sermon titled "The Eternal Now," Tillich said "There is no time *after* time, but there is eternity *above* time" (page 125, *The Eternal Now*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963).

In our own generation, Richard Rohr, calls this life "The Naked Now." That's the title his publishers gave to his book about learning to see as the mystics see. Many of us have benefitted from the presence of Richard Rohr-he spoke here at the Cathedral last year" and I highly recommend that book, *The Naked Now*.

Rohr seeks to recover the word "contemplation" as true prayer. "The word, "prayer," he says, "has often been trivialized by making it into a way of getting what you want. , It is not a technique for getting things, a pious exercise that somehow makes God happy, or a requirement for entry into heaven. It is much more like practicing heaven now" (Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now*, New York: Crossroad Publishing, pp.22-23).

Now.

The abundant life that Jesus brings to us is not about an everlasting continuation of something happy and fun. Nor is it a future anticipation of streets of gold in heaven.

The abundant life is about living right now, in the glorious presence of grace and truth. When we choose the way of Jesus, we are choosing life, right now, for ourselves and for the good of the world.

AMEN.

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