

“Rethinking life’s priorities”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
September 18, 2022

Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16 and 1 Timothy 6:6-19

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In March 2020, 68-year-old Randy Schiefer started to feel sick. At first, he thought it was the flu, but as his symptoms got worse, he tested positive for COVID-19. It got bad real fast. He was dying. The doctors induced a coma and put him on a heart-lung machine. He stayed that way, unconscious, barely alive, for a month. But he came back. He’s doing great now.

I’d say that he’s back to normal, except there is no “normal” after an experience like that, and there is no going back. Randy is a very different person now.

Before his brush with death, Randy was closed off and quick to get angry. He didn’t talk about his feelings. Randy’s daughter says he “seemed a little lost. Just going through the motions.” But after his near-death experience, this normally taciturn man started opening up about his feelings, talking about death and God, telling his daughter about his dad dying when he was just 16 years old. That was something he never talked about. He began praying. Randy says, “I’m much more open, much more welcoming, much more understanding than I was before, I think much more loving as a husband and father than I was before.” And he’s not the only one affected by this experience. His daughter moved back, to be closer to her parents.

Dr. Bruce Greyson, professor of psychiatry and neurobehavioral sciences at the University of Virginia, says this is quite common. People who come close to death often make big changes in their lives and careers. They begin to re-examine what really matters in life.¹

We’ve been doing a lot of that lately—rethinking how we spend our time and what kind of person we want to be. It’s like we all had this collective near-death experience in the pandemic. More than one million Americans died. And while many of us never got COVID or only had mild symptoms, we all lived under the threat of a disease that could hurt anyone, any time. For two years, we were isolated. Schools shut down. Churches shut down. We didn’t go to movies or restaurants or vacations. Jobs changed, or disappeared. We didn’t see our families or friends.

Everything changed. We did too.

We perceived just how fragile, and precious, life is—not only individual life, but society, community, culture.

So we began making changes—to our jobs, where we live, our relationships and family time, our faith lives, and how we spend our money. According to the Pew Research Center, more than one out of every five American adults moved because of the pandemic or knew someone who did. Time Magazine reports that a quarter of US adults are considering changing their careers because of the

¹ Lee Hale, NPR, “How a near-death experience could change the way you live”

pandemic. Another Pew study shows that 86 percent of US adults are re-evaluating their values on spiritual and personal levels.²

It's really good that the pandemic got us questioning what matters. But how do we know what to prioritize? How do we make these changes intentionally for the better, rather than just knee-jerk responses that might make us (or others) suffer more? Or in the words of Scripture, how do we know what is "the life that is really life"?

Maybe, the most important thing to remember is that it's OK to question, and it's OK not to have the answers. The Bible is full of times when people faced huge changes and had to re-evaluate their beliefs and wrestle with unanswered questions. The 91st Psalm tells us that we live in the shelter of God. Do not be afraid, the Psalmist says, God is with you. God is with you in times of trouble; God is with you when you have no idea what tomorrow is going to look like; God is with you when you have no clue who you are or even if God is. You are home.

Home—here at church, with God—means you are free to be curious, to wonder and debate, to try things out. Gandhi once said that our lives are "experiments with truth." You've got to try out things to see if they're true for you. Our mistakes aren't really mistakes, because we often learn what our life is by experiencing what it's not. For instance, by being a trauma one hospital chaplain, I learned that I was *not* called to trauma one hospital chaplain.

That also means that home—here at church, with God—is a great place to ask these questions together and learn together what, and who, matters. Everything in our lives, from media to politics to stuff, is trying to tell us what we should prioritize—usually because they've got something to sell us. Why not learn from the one place that values us for us, as beloved and beautiful?

That's what Paul's trying to do in his Letter to Timothy. Many scholars believe that what we read today comes from Timothy's baptism. As Timothy undergoes this big change and becomes a disciple of Christ, Paul wants to help him understand what to prioritize. He says it's a great life to combine "godliness" (or living with God) and "contentment."

Paul chooses his words carefully here. Most of the world tries to sell us happiness, a life free of disturbance and full of pleasant feelings. Paul doesn't offer that, because he knows that the most fulfilling things in life are often the hardest and the riskiest: parenting, relationships, discipleship, justice, vocation. The contentment Paul describes is fulfillment and meaning; it's being at peace with ourselves and our purpose. It's a Greek word, *αὐτάρκεια* (*autárkeia*, *ow-tar'-ki-ah*), Paul has borrowed from Stoic philosophers, an internal self-satisfaction that cannot be erased by outward circumstance.³ "On Christ, the solid rock, I stand; all other ground is sinking sand."⁴

Paul asks, Why do we worry? We didn't bring anything into this world, and we can't take it with us. Those things don't matter. There are certain basic necessities (food, clothing, shelter), but beyond that, that's not what life is about. If you prioritize the wrong things, by seeking that which is not life, by seeking wealth or power or pride or status or material pleasure, you will feel empty. Instead, he says, find joy in what endures. Be righteous. Have faith. Be gentle. Love. He says, "Take hold of

² Jamie Ducharme, Time, "Why the COVID-19 Pandemic Has Caused a Widespread Existential Crisis"

³ Christian Eberhart; Strong Lexicon

⁴ The refrain from the hymn "My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less" by Edward Mote (1834).

the eternal life to which you were called.” That eternal life isn’t just in the future; it’s now, within you, for God has breathed God’s very eternal life into you.

The Greek here is adamant. Paul says to capture life, to go after it with everything you’ve got.⁵ We might hear in Paul echoes of Robin Williams in *Dead Poets Society*: “Seize the day!”

Be the truest expression of who God made you to be. Everything else is a waste of your time.

Try out some questions the next time you’re faced with a choice. Does this fill me up, or burn me out? And by “burn out,” we don’t mean exhausting, because the most important things tend to be exhausting; rather, we mean things that don’t fulfill you, don’t connect you with a deeper value and purpose, but seem pointless.

Another question: Does this give joy to God?

Or: How does this fit into my relationship with God? Does it help me worship, or serve, or love, or grow? Does this express the joyful truth of who I am as God made me?

Now, I know those are big questions. Hard to answer. You may not know who God made you to be. That’s OK. But at least now we’re asking the right questions, which is more than half the battle. It’s not: How easy is it? Or, How much stuff or money does it give? Or, How popular is my choice? How much does it conform to others’ expectations? It’s not what feeds my ego, or what makes me comfortable, or provides an escape.

We should only do—and this is gospel good news—what makes us come alive, what is worthy of life.

God has been singing to us this truth since beginning of time. It is etched in the stars, buried in the soil, flung across oceans, and painted in the faces of those around us. Life is here. Abundant and wild, fecund and stunning. Just make sure you choose the real stuff, “the life that really is life,” the places where the life in you connect with the life in God.

Henry David Thoreau said, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

Mary Oliver said, “When it’s over, I want to say: all my life I was a bride to amazement.”

Howard Thurman said, “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

The point is that we worship a God of life, not death. Choose life. Choose joy. Choose purpose. Choose love. There is a life in you, planted by God, nay, that is God, and it is just waiting to sing with the eons. Let it sing. **Amen.**

⁵ Stephanie Mar Smith, *Feasting on the Word*.