

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
April 30, 2023

Land of the Living

Psalm 27

“He is not the God of the dead, but of the living” (Mark 12:27). You may be thinking, “Wait a minute, have I gone back in time? Wasn’t that the way you opened last Sunday’s sermon?” Rest assured, today’s message isn’t a rerun. But it is an opportunity to continue reflecting on the meaning of what we celebrated three weeks ago, the resurrection of Jesus. God raised Jesus from the dead. He is God of the living.

It only makes sense, then, that those who are brought into relationship with this life-giving God occupy a place, a space, called “the land of the living.” It’s an expression that appears several times in the Scriptures, particularly the Psalms and the Prophets. This idiom has also made its way from the pages of Scripture onto the tongues of people we engage with in our own lives. I recall a conversation here at church with a woman who had been away from the life of our congregation for quite some time, as she was heavily involved in caring for her aging and ill husband in his struggle with dementia. Her devotion to being with him and providing for his needs meant that she wasn’t able to attend our worship services very often. When she greeted me face to face that particular Sunday, one of the first things out of her mouth was, “I’m back out in the land of the living.” She wasn’t being insensitive to her husband’s situation, but simply acknowledging that her responsibilities at home had kept her from being out and about more, including involvement in the life of our congregation.

Musical artists have also drawn upon this “land of the living” terminology. In a song by that very title, a group called Church of the City lifts up the chorus: “I’m confident of this / That I will see Your goodness / In the land of the living / In the land of the living / One thing will never change / My hope is in Your name / Because You are living / Because You are living / Oh, because You are living.” Once again, the nature and character of God’s people are defined by the nature and character of God himself. The God of the living creates a people who inhabit the land of the living.

This song by Church of the City picks up on the psalmist’s lament in this morning’s text: “I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living” (v. 13). Notice that this assurance of faith isn’t blind to the realities that threaten and trouble daily existence. Right after an opening confession of trust in the Lord as light and refuge, the psalmist recognizes the presence of multiple threats—evildoers, enemies, war. The psalmist could be speaking literally or metaphorically here. In either case, the point is that these things aren’t just minor risks. They’re life-threatening realities. The psalmist feels like he’s being attacked, mentally, physically, and spiritually.

Earlier in our service, you heard Linda read from Psalm 116: “For you, O Lord, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before the Lord in the land of the living” (vv. 8-9). This psalm contains 13 references to life-threatening conditions and circumstances: distress, tears, affliction, death, and so on. As Eugene Peterson has summarized it:

That adds up to a lot of trouble. This is our context. The land of the living is dangerous country. A lot goes wrong. There is a lot of trouble brewing out there and in here. Resurrection takes place in the country of death.

The land of the living is obviously not a vacation paradise. It's more like a war zone. And that's where we Christians are stationed to affirm the primacy of life over death, to give a witness to the connectedness and preciousness of all life, to engage in the practice of resurrection.¹

The church is a community where we both preach and practice the resurrection. We announce it and we embody it. We live it out among ourselves and in the world, as a sign that God's saving, life-giving power abides and operates in the midst of conditions of death, whatever forms those conditions take. And in the process we give testimony to hope.

Professional golfer Paul Azinger was 33 years old when he was diagnosed with cancer. He had just won a PGA championship and had ten tournament victories to his credit. Azinger wrote, "A genuine feeling of fear came over me. I could die from cancer. Then another reality hit me even harder. I'm going to die eventually anyway, whether from cancer or something else. It's just a question of when. Everything I had accomplished in my life became meaningless to me. All I wanted to do was live." Then Azinger remembered something that PGA chaplain Larry Moody said to him: "Zinger, we're not in the land of the living going to the land of the dying. We're in the land of the dying trying to get to the land of the living."

Eventually Azinger recovered from chemotherapy, returned to the PGA tour, and did pretty well. But that bout with cancer deepened his perspective. He wrote,

I've made a lot of money since I've been on the tour, and I've won a lot of tournaments, but that happiness is always temporary. The only way you will ever have true contentment is in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I'm not saying that nothing ever bothers me and I don't have problems, but I feel like I've found the answer to the six-foot hole.²

In this gathering here today, we're continuing to remember and reflect on the good news that Jesus is the answer to the six-foot hole. His victory over the grave is what gives believers assurance of life beyond it, as well as life before it. Remember that the psalmist says, "I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord." So confidence in the Lord generates waiting, not in the sense of standing by and doing nothing, but in the sense of actively trusting in divine action. How could our waiting possibly be passive? Christ is already risen, and the six-foot hole, while it still tries to threaten and torment us, cannot destroy us. We live in the already of Christ's Lordship, while we await the not yet of the coming kingdom. We've already set foot in the land of the living, and look forward to the day when we'll take up full residence. That's what's make us, here and now, a fellowship of faith, hope, and courage.

Note how the psalmist seeks God, and nurtures his trust, through active involvement in worship. "One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple. ... At his tabernacle will I sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the Lord" (vv. 4, 6b). These words stir up recollections of what was expressed in Psalm 23: "Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (v. 6).

When our church's day care ministry was here, the children would regularly see me pop in and out of their space in the educational wing during the course of the day. That usually meant passing back and forth through our sanctuary doors with those tiny windows. The children knew that this was a special space, for special purposes, especially when we gathered for weekly worship. I'm guessing that they often wondered, what does Pastor Kevin do in that room? Or, as one little boy put it very frankly one day, "Pastor Kevin, do you live here?"

"That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life." The psalmist doesn't mean that he wants to move into the temple. He's simply saying that he wants to grow more fully into a way of life characterized by living in the presence of God. He wants God to protectively surround him with his beauty. And this beauty has to do with the radiance of God's presence. Being in the presence of God is where the psalmist finds security in the midst of things that threaten life.

This doesn't mean that when the psalmist, or we ourselves, come into the presence of God, whether together on Sunday morning or individually on a daily basis, we need to check our sufferings and struggles at the door. Notice how the psalmist tells his story, in all its brokenness. He speaks of his pain. He opens up about his fears. He pours out his complaint. And in the process, he renews his trust and recovers his joy, not by silencing his sorrows but by bringing them with him into the presence of a God whose will for us is deliverance, wholeness, and life. He is God of the living, and we his people occupy a space, a realm called the land of the living.

Though we won't fully reside in that realm until our risen Lord returns, we already, in one sense, occupy this space, most of all in our life together as the church. The land of the living isn't a dreamy territory that's way out ahead of us, just waiting for us to discover it. It's a place that has already come upon us through Jesus Christ. It's a way of sharing life together that God has opened up to us through Christ's death and resurrection. The kind of love and righteousness and peace that God intends for the world is designed to take shape even now in our fellowship. The church is meant to be and to provide a glimpse of life in the land of the living.

Preacher and teacher Michael Quicke tells about a birthday surprise his parents gave him when he was nine or ten years old. He says:

[They] announced I was going on a mystery tour and needed to be blindfolded. First we drove a few miles. Then I was helped out of the car, giggling, trying unsuccessfully to see out of the blindfold's sides, and needing to hold on to my parents' hands. I had no idea where we were. At first we walked in the open air, then we entered a building and began climbing up steps. Up and up—I knew it must be a tower. Once or twice people passed by—"Kidnapping him?" they said. We climbed higher.

Reaching the top, I could feel the sun and breeze on my face. My mother and father took the blindfold off, and I blinked with happiness at the sight before me. I was at the top of the Cabot Tower in Bristol, England. The city lay below, the river danced beneath, countryside rolled beyond, and the sea glinted in the distance. It was dazzling and brilliant as I stood there with my kid brother and my parents. Reflecting now on that moment, I am fairly sure it was the first time in my life that I truly experienced being alive.

Quicke then concludes:

Up until then I had little perception of a world full of beauty, trust, love, purity, and joy. But right then its big picture just couldn't be beaten. Everything was good in the deep places of

my body, mind, and spirit. Astonishingly good! As I have grown older, I have had a few other experiences like that, and definitely the best times have been in worship when I have known, joining with others, that I belong to God in depths of beauty, trust, love, purity, and joy.³

"I am still confident of this," says that psalmist. "I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." The way into a life lived in the beauty of God's presence has been opened up to us by Jesus, who is described this way in the prophet Isaiah: "By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken" (53:8). Before he was raised, our Lord suffered for us and went to the grave, the realm of the dead, so that we can have access to the land of the living, in the presence of the God of the living. Thanks be to God.

¹ "Life in a Country of Death." An Excerpt from Eugene H. Peterson, *Living the Resurrection* (Colorado Springs: NavPress) n.p. Christianity Today. April 12, 2006. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/aprilweb-only/eugene-peterson-life-death-country.html> (April 26, 2023).

² Robert Russell, "Resurrection Promises." Preaching Today, Tape. No. 151.

³ Michael Quicke, *Preaching as Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011) 74.