

Kent United Church of Christ
8 March 2009, Second Sunday of Lent
Sermon by the Rev. David Pattee, senior pastor



Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16, Mark 8:31-38

To be, or not to be, that is the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles and, by opposing, end them.

To die, to sleep -- no more -- and by a sleep to say we end the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep, to sleep, perchance to dream -- ay, there's the rub: for in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil must give us pause. There's the respect that makes calamity of so long life: for who would bear the whips and scorns of time, the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, the pangs of despised love, the law's delay, the insolence of office, and the spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes, when he himself might his quietus make with a bare bodkin. Who would fardels bear to grunt and sweat under a weary life, but that the dread of something after death, the undiscover'd country from whose borne no traveler returns, puzzles the will, and makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others we know not of?

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all, and thus the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought, and enterprises of great pitch and moment with this regard their currents turn awry, and lose the name of action.

Despite the amateurish delivery, I will venture that many of you recognized this gripping moment from the Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, by William Shakespeare, perhaps the most powerful expression of human anguish in all of English literature. For some it is the very definition of what we would now call existential angst: the individual's pained struggle to find meaning and redemptive purpose in a life that so often seems arbitrary or chaotic, irrational or just plain mean. The young prince choking with resentment and rage railed against the injustice of a world that was anything but fair, in which the very foundations of his being had been betrayed. Family, friendship, love and honor, everyone and everything he had trusted, it all turned to suspicion, anger, resentment, hate and, finally, death.

It's a wild story! But is it really so far off from the terrible complexities of our living and dying: the griefs and angers and fears that all of us one time or another have felt, the predicament that is at the center of the human condition? Do we not bear the whips and scorns of time, the oppressor's wrong, the arrogance of the proud, the wounds of love lost, the law's delay, the abuse of power, and the defeat of so many of our best efforts and hopes and dreams?

Who among us has not felt betrayed, disappointed, tricked, cheated by those we would trust, by the institutions and structures and projects in which we have invested our time and talent and treasure? Who among us has not wondered why life seems so often unfair, why time and again we turn out to be our own worst enemy, and why God allows it to be that way? Which one of you has not wondered if it wouldn't be better to just let it go: to resign from consciousness and from the cares of this world -- to get by, go along, hide out or, one way or another, check out.

Haven't there been times when it was a consummation devoutly to be wish'd?

To be, or not to be? To do or not to do? To take responsibility and be accountable, to struggle, or just to give up? Isn't that a question, isn't that the question for all of us?

God said to Abram: *I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.*

To Abram and Sarai this must have seemed like a very strange call. Where they were wasn't great, but they were certainly getting by, and not at all inclined to move. They were well into old age, well past their prime, and who could blame them if they weren't exactly on fire for a new adventure. But there came this compelling invitation: *Abram, I am not done with you. I promise you a future.*

To be or not to be? To do or not to do? To risk a future, to believe in a future, to struggle for a future, to trust the hand that shapes our future, or to let it go, to resign from consciousness and the cares of this world, to end the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to. To be or not to be: that is a question, that is the question for all of us.

Jesus was teaching and he said that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected, and be killed, and after three days rise again. *On the way to the future God has in store for me and for us all there will be doubts and hardships, he said, but I will not turn aside.*

Peter, his friend and the leading disciple, took him aside and, the scripture says, rebuked Jesus. *The future right now is too risky. Herod wants you dead! The people are not prepared for a real revolution. What you're doing is bound for defeat. Let the struggle go, at least for now.*

But Jesus answered him, *Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things. You're thinking about how to tinker with the status quo when the call of God's love is to change the rules, to go out in a venture with what is truly new and always renewing. Today, tomorrow and the next day, I must be on my way. My work is not yet done, my life is not yet fulfilled. Though terrifying darkness is near and all around me, though consciousness of my death and the cares of this world are heavy upon me, I will not turn aside. I believe in a future. What will it profit to gain the whole world if we forfeit this new life to which God is calling us. Don't be afraid. Take up your cross and follow.*

To be or not to be? To do or not to do? To risk a future, to believe in a future, to struggle for a future, to trust the hand that shapes our future, or to let it go, to resign from consciousness and the cares of this world, to end the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to. To be or not to be: that is a question, that is the question for all of us. Isn't it? We face it in our friendships, and marriages, and families, we face it in work, citizenship and community, we face it in this church, and everywhere in life and faith... to take the risk to love, to answer a call, to follow a hope and purpose beyond self-preservation, or to spin along as the center of our own pathetic little universe until a mortality that will not be denied strips away the last of our pretensions and we just die.

Jesus challenges us with the truth we all know but are so often afraid to live: survival is not enough, and those who devote themselves to nothing more than what they have will surely fail, for all things do turn to dust. If we don't have some meaning that merits risk, some purpose that exceeds self interest, some truth that's ultimately worth dying for then, I suggest to you, that we don't much really worth living for.

There are threatening forces at work in the world today, more complex than even the best of us fully understand. If you're not at least a little anxious, you're just not paying attention. And in the face of such anxiety, the temptation for those of us who can get away with it is to resign from consciousness and from the cares of this world -- to get by, go along, hide out or, one way or another, check out. But the call of this moment, the opportunity of this moment, the invitation of love in this moment is to embrace the future, to live confidently in the covenant of God's love.

Don't just survive. For God's sake and your own... prosper! Make the most of the life you have been given and enjoy it to the fullest by sharing it. Turn to Jesus Christ and live in his way: love God, serve others, grab on to the meaning and purpose that do not fade or fail. For this calling Abraham left home and went with Sarah to establish a nation of witness in a promised land; for this love, for you, Jesus Christ died on a cross and rose again that we might have life and have it more abundantly. Don't let that life die in you. In you, let it live. Take up your cross and follow.