

Text: Colossians 3: 1-11
Title: Hidden Lives
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How do you think of your life? As a way of describing it, or framing it, or understanding it ~ how do you think of your life?

Is it a series of events linked by cause and effect ~ as spring follows winter, high school follows junior high, and retirement follows career? Is it a collage ~ colorful moments and faded watercolor memories loosely collected like slides in a carousel or images on Instagram? Is it a journey in a purposeful direction where challenges are matched and goals are met ~ sprinkled with vacations in the sun? Or, is it a haphazard trajectory like a pinball bouncing from bumper to bumper ~ the random collision of people, experiences, and feelings?

How do you think of your life?

I have a good therapist (who's also a good friend). At least with me, he asked questions that pulled out stories and over time a narrative emerged with plot, depth, themes, and maybe even character development. In the telling and retelling, in the remembering and reflecting, a story surfaced that now serves as way to make some sense of my life. It helped frame the past but it also helps set direction for the future. It's not a finished product but a narrative thread emerged.

That process is not unlike the guy sitting at the corner of the bar rehearsing and rehashing the same stories, or the woman affixing creative memories in a scrapbook, or the born-again believer bubbling up with testimony. There is something in all of us that wants to find meaning and coherence to our lives. There is something in all of us that wants to make sense of the stories of our lives with the story of our life.

How do you think of your life?

Well, dear friends, let me draw your attention to a little phrase in this morning's text as a way to interpret your life.

...you died, your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

Now. Paul doesn't mean *hidden* in terms of being protected from something scary or evading being found. It's not ducking behind your mother's apron, or slipping behind a tree, but *hidden* here has the sense of something concealed that will be revealed. You might not see it now but it will surface later. Like the unrolling of a scroll, or something cloudy that will clear, *hidden with Christ* is more about participation than protection.

Your life is hidden with Christ.

And, it is probably worth noting that Christ is not hidden in you, but you're hidden in Christ. It's not Jesus in you, but you in Jesus. This is not you subsuming the story of Jesus, but the story of Jesus subsuming you. As an ontological reality your life resides, is hidden in, and will be revealed in the larger story of Jesus.

And, Paul doesn't frame this as a conditional clause. It doesn't read, "If you have been raised...." Rather it reads as a statement of reality.

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ your life is now hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

I like that way of thinking about life.

Your life is hidden in the story of Jesus. No matter it's condition or circumstances, your life is concealed in the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and coming glory of Jesus.

I've walked with and watched families navigate the decline and death of loved ones to Alzheimer's. There are some familiar patterns. Quirky and confused behavior is at the same time endearing and terrifying. And as that behavior gets more pronounced it makes sense to keep the loved one at home, in more familiar surroundings, and life gets noticeably smaller....

But, there is undeniably something essential slipping away. There's a connection or a core that seems in retreat. While there may be moments of understanding and intimacy those are fewer and farther between and they too are soon lost in the haze of the disease.

Eventually whatever recognizable spark there was in their eyes is lost to a blank stare. And often, their care requires more than family and friend alone can provide. The decline can be horrifying and disfiguring until the loved one is virtually unrecognizable. It's not the way that they understood or imagined their story. It's not what they thought of their lives.

And yet....

And yet, the hope of the gospel is not that they have hidden Jesus in their hearts and now get to go to heaven. The faith of the scriptures is not that somewhere along the way they were fortunate enough to find Jesus and smart enough or strong enough to hold on to him even to the end.

The good news is that their lives are hidden in Jesus Christ. Their lives are concealed in the life, death, resurrection, and second coming of Jesus. Even when they don't know it, their story is caught up in the story of Jesus.

Thanks be to God.

In Reformed parlance we talk about this ontological reality as “belonging.”

What is your only comfort in life and in death?

That I belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Savior....

Dear friends, rather than frame your story as competition, or consumption, or even community, rather than think about what you’ve accomplished or what you’ve lost, rather than think about faith as a proposition that calls for belief, or a mystery that demands assent, consider your life *now hidden with Christ in God*.

To mix metaphors for a minute. The movement of God from creation to covenant to incarnation to crucifixion to resurrection to consummation is the fabric with which your life is woven. So, every nuance of your story would be stitched with that thread.

Therefore, every disappointment holds the possibility of redemption,
and every stumbling holds the hope of forgiveness,
and every death is not the last stitch,
for every ending would be gathered into glory.
Your life is woven with the fabric of the gospel.
It may be hidden now – it will be revealed in the future.
Again, thanks be to God.

Now, for my money, the finest sermon preached for months and months and months here at Hope was offered last week by Erin Pacheco. She plays and sings and preaches! She and Moises oughta plant a new church....

The sermon last week was faithful, thoughtful, challenging, honest, literate, biblical ~ excellent. Fortunately, you can listen to it again on the “Sermons from Hope” podcast, or read a copy from the website or grab one off the back table.

Erin asked the question, “Where does your allegiance lie?” Or, “Where do you ground your identity?” And she cast a compelling vision for how the Empire and the Kingdom both offer liturgies that shape our sense of allegiance. Listen again to Erin quoting Jamie Smith,

Liturgies are love-shaping practices, they are communal social rhythms, routines and rituals that we immerse ourselves in, that we give ourselves over to, that aren’t just something that we do, but they’re doing something to us. They’re forging in us an orientation to the good life. They’re inscribing in us a conception of what we think flourishing is. And because there are competing versions, so there are rival liturgies.

Erin (and Paul) go on to make the argument that the practices of baptism, communion, scripture, worship, and life together are the liturgies that shape our allegiances. And, to pull in themes from the sermon before Erin’s, we take up those love-shaping practices that we might indeed follow a seditious and subversive Jesus, that we might grow and flourish and overflow with thanksgiving.

In our text this morning Paul goes on to say that because our lives are hidden in Christ we are called to an ethic that stands in contrast to the ethic of the Empire. To put it simply: we are called to particular patterns of behavior that befit and bear witness to the location of our life.

We would be sexually faithful as an expression of belonging to God.

We would be generous economically as an expression of belonging to God.

We would speak in a manner that respects and honors others as an expression of being hidden in Christ.

We would cast off the idols of the predominant culture as an expression of being hidden in Christ.

And those patterns of behavior would stand in stark contrast to the patterns of the Empire. To paraphrase Brian Walsh:

When the apostle calls us to get rid of “anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language” that just might sound like every day political language. While an abusive discourse has always been at the heart of political life, we have seen it descend to new lows in recent years. The problem here isn’t so much the lack of manners and common decency as it is the free reign we give to dismissive and slanderous language in every-day life. And it isn’t just a matter of how we talk about people who are different than us (whoever the ‘us’ might be), but it is there in the double-speak of Wall Street, the seduction of the advertising industry, the spin of politicians, and, yes, the way in which Christians talk about each other in the ecclesiastical culture wars.

Again, the point is as those hidden in Christ we are called to particular patterns of behavior that befit and bear witness to the location of our life.

Farmer/poet/prophet Wendell Berry wrote a poem entitled *The Mad Farmer, Flying the Flag of Rough Branch, Secedes from the Union*. As delineated in the poem the idols of the Empire are the union of power and greed and consumption that do violence to the earth and to community. Berry’s poetic point is that we must walk away from such unions. That we must secede. But secede to what or whom? Here’s a few closing lines from Wendell Berry.

*From the union self-gratification and self-annihilation,
Secede into the care of one another
And for the good gifts of Heaven and Earth.
Come into the life of the body, the one body
Granted to you in all the history of time.
Come into the body’s economy, its daily work,
And its replenishment at mealtimes and at night.
Come into the body’s thanksgiving, when it knows
And acknowledges itself a living soul.
Come into the dance of the community, joined*

*In a circle, hand in hand, the dance of the eternal
Love of women and men for one another
And of neighbors and friends for one another.*

Dear friends, how do you think about your life?

*...your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life,
appears, then you shall also appear with him in glory.*

Thanks be to God.

Amen.