

What Is Your Life?
October 01, 2006
Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

I want to speak with you this morning about life. Tucked away in the Epistle of James you heard a few moments ago is this question: *What is your life? (4:14)*. If we ask this question of ourselves in some rare moment of introspection, we are likely to give St. James own answer: *you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes* (v. 14).

This is true in the largest sense and yet while it does last, our life, each of our lives have real substance and texture. It has indefinable qualities, which may be both good and bad. If asking ourselves, or having God ask us, *What is your life*, we understand the question to be *what is it that gives your life its basic character and direction*, there are any number of possible answers we can learn to recognize for better or worse. One is the general observation that is fundamental. It is quite simply that life is all we have, that peculiar state of being alive, able to think and to feel.

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We are occupied by many things, but we do not possess them, although they may possess us. The pursuit and care of money may take all our time and energy so that we have none left for anything else. But, money is notably slippery stuff that's hard to hold onto. We have homes and goods which require our attention, but they can all be destroyed in minutes, or out-last us by centuries. The antique shops are filled with things whose makers and original owners, for all their care and pride, are now unknown. I've done my share of collecting over the years (my wife would say "more than my share" and when I go those things will stay.

Nor, do we possess our children, our friends, our parents, or anyone else, although our relationships with people may be the major concern of our lives. They have lives of their own from which we are shut out. The pathway of their years takes them in a different direction from our pathway until they no

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longer belong to us, as if they ever did. We keep them only by letting them go and this is the hardest lesson parents especially have to learn. The concluding verse of one of the great hymns of the Church (#680, The Hymnal 1982) has this to say: *Time, like an ever rolling stream, bears all our years away; they fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day.* We are subject to the limitation of time. Only the Church is timeless.

But, we do have a life of our own; the span of years allotted to us in the mystery of fate, the peculiar store of powers that belong to us alone, the special range of sensitivities and insights through which we can perceive realities in ways no one else perceives them. I suggest to you that life is an empty box, which we can fill with anything we like. What we put into its emptiness is what gives our life its special character and direction, and what makes it whatever it really is,

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and what we put into that box differs from time to time through the years.

When we are young, our lives are filled with the hopes and visions of what it will become, visions occupied with self-doubt, but also education, training and preparation that are meant to remove that doubt. These are years of opening windows on the world to see it in all its glory and tragedy, of finding keys to doors through which we can go out and take our place in the world. These are years of possibly leaving the nest to find our own friends and associates. It can be a very exciting part of life.

When we are old there is sometimes a tendency to give ourselves to the memories, good and bad, of what life has been. We want to fondly recount the old days. As strength diminishes, there is a danger that we will become only spectators and critics of life rather than

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participants. It doesn't have to be that way, but sometimes it is.

Between youth and old age are the years of maturity, years filled with responsibility and struggle, years when our ambitions drive us to do and be the very best that we can. These are the years when we try to create new relationships with people by our own choice through marriage, work and friendship. Much of life's middle part is filled with this process of choice, which makes up the real texture of what life is in its best and most characteristic time.

Behind this passage through the various stages of life, and within each stage, the religious person sees the hand of God. If we are to welcome what the years bring to us, we ought also welcome the love and wisdom which continually speak to us in ways that are sometimes hard to understand, though the response they call for is never harder than we can make. The

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response is called *faith* and it's the choicest ingredient we can put in the box, faith in the presence of the power and love of the God who made us for himself, who uses us for his purposes and will yet guide us to the place where he would have us to be.

We have only one *real* choice in this life: we can let life be filled up with a whole conglomeration of things, people, fears, appetites, regrets, resentments, or we can offer it to God and let him take his place as the real substance of our life. Then, more and more, the answer to St. James' question, *What is your life?* becomes, God.

It is a life filled with trust and wonder, awe and obedience, and with love responding to his love. We are drawn to him by the knowledge that we have such a God as is shown to us in Jesus Christ. It is life that is transformed in all its inmost nature by being given to God, consciously, deliberately, humbly, and faithfully.

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It is life that has come to count on nothing else but God.

No matter who we are, or what our age, or what life is now, God can give our lives a quality which will not vanish like a morning mist, but will abide forever because it comes from him and is the quality of life eternal.

AMEN.