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ICor15
“Intimations of Immortality”

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

The American writer, John Updike, was famous for his many novels and short stories. But he was also a prolific book reviewer, and he would often evaluate books on philosophy and religion. (He attended an Episcopal Church, by the way.)

It’s not a complete surprise, then, that Updike would write a memoir called *Self—Consciousness*. In the book, Updike often remarks on the strangeness of consciousness—how mysterious it is to be a “self.”

Philosophers have debated for centuries whether the fact that we are conscious means that we have souls apart from our bodies. They have further speculated that our souls could allow us to continue to exist when our bodies die.

And biologists have many different theories to explain the experience of being conscious, although most of them shy away from speculating about life after death. Biologists agree, however, that there is no universally accepted theory that explains what it means to be an individual thinking person—a person with sensations and emotions and awareness of oneself and the surrounding world.

But those of us who are Christians believe that the mystery of consciousness is one bit of evidence that we humans have an inner essence – an inner essence that could exist apart from our physical bodies.

John Updike mentions skeptics who think that the wish for immortality is a self-serving dream. By contrast, for him, he says, “The yearning for an afterlife is the opposite of selfish: it is love and praise for the world that we are privileged ... to witness and experience.”

We Christians would agree with the philosophers and scientists that this inner essence is indeed extraordinary and, as a result, it is hard to talk about. But we would also say that being conscious points to a religious belief of great importance to us—our conviction that we will indeed be given a *life after death* with God.

Now I admit that if consciousness is mysterious, eternal life is even more so!

Think of the confusion that the disciples of Jesus felt when they encountered Christ after he had risen from the dead.

When Jesus appeared to the disciples after the Resurrection, he looked different from the way he looked before he died. Sometimes, his disciples recognized him right away; other times, it took them a while.

And Jesus would suddenly appear and disappear as though he had no tangible qualities—yet, at one point, he challenged his disciples to touch him, and there is a report of him eating.

So even the evidence of what immortality might be like that we get from the Resurrection of Jesus—even this evidence may be hard to process.

The Apostle Paul though speculated about the resurrection and developed his thoughts about life after death in a remarkable passage that we heard in today’s First Lesson. Paul noted that someone who is not a Christian might ask the question, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?”

Paul answers these questions by using the image of a seed being buried in the ground. Although the seed seems to die, new life will emerge in the form of a plant.

Paul’s thinking here is based on pre-scientific biology. Ancient people believed that seeds had to die so that plants could grow from them. We now know that, strictly speaking, that’s not true. Seeds *germinate*; they don’t die.

But the image works when Paul applies it to people. He talks of dead persons being raised with new spiritual bodies. The departed soul “is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.”

Christ died in a physical form and rose on Easter Day in a spiritual form. Christ's death on our behalf makes it possible for us to survive death. So, Paul says, that like Jesus, we will live on in a spiritual form.

Now as we might expect, there has been much speculation over the centuries about *how* our future resurrection might happen. Even though Paul believed that in Christ we would be given spiritual bodies, he admitted that the future life remains a "mystery."

But, to me, this mystery doesn't constitute a problem! Rather, it suggests that life in Heaven will be endlessly creative—endlessly surpassing our ideas here on earth. It will always be interesting and challenging.

In other words, life after death *won't* prove to be like an everlasting church service! As the Bible suggests, there will be no temple in the heavenly Jerusalem.

We won't need a church because after death we won't be in the material world, and so matter won't mediate our access to God. As St. Paul says, after death we will see God not as now "in a mirror," but "face-to-face"—directly, without the physical getting in the way.

Now I recognize that there is a large degree of speculation involved in St. Paul's ideas about Heaven. I also realize that, in this life, we can't expect to have all the mental concepts that we would need to conceive of the world to come.

But there are other ways to compensate for the fallibility of our intellects regarding eternal life. For instance, we might find that we sometimes have *experiences* that seem to tell us that this life isn't the end.

The poet William Wordsworth felt that human beings can have what he called, "intimations of immortality." These feelings occur when we feel our souls stretching beyond the purely physical world.

For Wordsworth, the beauty of the natural world gave him transcendent experiences of happiness. (You may have read his famous poem that begins, "I wandered lonely as a cloud, upon a field of golden daffodils.")

Think of the experience of watching a beautiful sunset. Doesn't that take you beyond your body?

Intimations of immortality may also come to us in other ways. When a person you loved died, you might have sensed that she was still with you. You might even have felt like talking to the deceased person!

This experience gave you an assurance that while your friend no longer lived in a physical state on earth, she continued to exist in another dimension.

And here's a further intimation of immortality. Think of the surge of happiness that fills your heart when things are going just the way you want them to. Don't you feel that this is more than a physical feeling? Isn't something happening to your soul?

A third example might be when we sense in our hearts that still small voice of God. We know that God touches our souls, and so he will keep us and protect us. And if we feel that God is with us, we can trust that he will preserve us for eternity.

In the first Lesson we heard, St. Paul compares human beings first with Adam and then with Jesus. He writes, "Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven." We are mortal as Adam was yet because we are in Christ, we will share in the joys of eternity.

I close with some lines from Wordsworth:

"But trailing clouds of glory do we come

From God, who is our home:

Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

Shades of the prison-house begin to close

Upon the growing Boy,

But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,

He sees it in his joy..."

Amen.