

An unquenchable trust

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The below train of thought was prompted by [reflection on my grandmother's death and the opportunity I had to officiate her funeral](#). She was quite certain about what awaited her on the other side.

I, on the other hand, am deeply agnostic about what happens to us when we die. Perhaps this is an odd position for a pastor to maintain. When people are mourning the loss of a loved one—or when they contemplate their own mortality—they are more interested in assurances of peace and happiness in the afterlife than uncertainties or ambiguities. But I have always been troubled by the certainty with which so many Christians talk about what happens when we die.

Back in my “sola scriptura” days, it occurred to me that the Bible is rather vague about what happens after death, so I always thought it was theologically misguided to speak about the afterlife with much certainty. When I began to study the histories of ancient Israelite religion, Second Temple Judaism, and early Christianity, I realized that beliefs about the afterlife were clearly works in progress that changed and evolved over time. It seems to me that our hopes about what lies beyond death is wishful thinking and speculation at best.

This doesn't preach very well or provide much comfort to those who are mourning, so I don't make a big deal of it when I lead a funeral. But I do tend to keep my words vague and don't offer up a lot of certainties. While death is an inevitability, I prefer to speak of what happens *after* death as a mystery. The Bible provides some evocative images in which we may find hope, but it seems disingenuous for us to speak about such matters with absolute confidence and certainty.

As is often the case, it helps in situations like this to rely on liturgy to say the things we struggle with ourselves. In this regard, I have found great utility and comfort in a prayer of thanksgiving that I adapted from the 1946 [Book of Common Worship](#). This prayer, which I offer at every funeral or memorial service I officiate, includes this stunningly beautiful phrase:

Almighty God, we thank you that deep in the human heart is an unquenchable trust that life does not end with death.

This doesn't speak of certainties. This doesn't make metaphysical claims we cannot support. This doesn't pretend that the Bible provides clarity where none exists. This doesn't spell out detailed scenarios we can never know on this side of the grave.

But with sublime grace, these words speak of the ineffable hope many humans share. We may not know with certainty what happens when we die, but we can and do experience hope and trust that transcends knowledge.

*Originally posted at [Vest's blog](#)*