



QUESTION OF FAITH: “Can Your Soul Exist in Eternity if You Do Not Literally Believe This?”

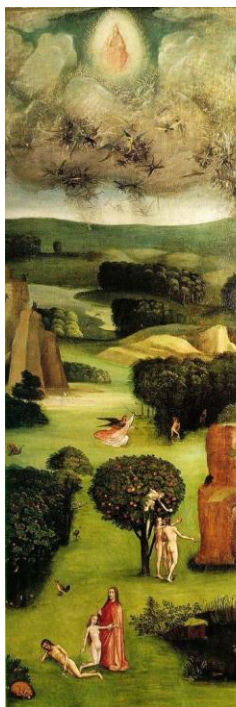
Scripture Readings: I Corinthians 15:12-26, Luke 23:39-43

Our Question of Faith for the morning is my favorite from this summer: “*Can Your Soul Exist in Eternity If You Do Not Literally Believe This?*” I love the way the question argues with itself like a cat chasing its own tail. It feels true to me, authentic to the way in which our faith statements are always reaching beyond our grasp, grappling with questions we can never fully answer. It reminds me of the frantic father asking Jesus if he can heal his son in Mark’s Gospel. Jesus tells him, “*All things can be done for the one who believes,*” and the father blurts out this faith declaration: “*I believe; help my unbelief!*” (Mark 9:23-24).

“Can Your Soul Exist in Eternity If You Do Not Literally Believe This?” It seems to me this question has two mysteries, one has to do with what we think the soul is and the second has to do with what happens to us after death. What I’d like to do is take the second mystery first and the first mystery second; in other words, talk a little bit about the concept of eternal life, especially in the concepts of heaven and hell, and then circle back to talk about what is a soul.

Let me acknowledge that our understanding of what happens after death – ideas of salvation and damnation – is based on concepts not really spelled out in the scriptures beyond some rather vague if hopeful images. The traditional religious images of the last judgment are really more shaped by non-biblical sources like Dante’s *Inferno*. Particularly interesting to me are the artists who have tackled this subject. I’d like to call your attention of four of them, all entitled “The Last Judgment.”

The first painting I want us to consider this morning: a triptych by Hieronymus Bosch created around 1482.





The three panels show us vivid depictions of the ways in which a second coming and divine judgment were imagined at the time Bosch was painting. The left panel gives us the Garden of Eden, green and peaceful, towered over by a luminous God. Yet God is surrounded by good and bad angels engaged in battle while the bottom of the panel shows an Adam and Eve being ejected from the garden. The Center panel gives us an image of the Last Judgement the artist draws out of the Book of Revelation. Christ the Judge is surrounded by the few who have made it into the blue celestial zone while the damned, many more in number, are below being burned, speared, impaled, hung from butcher's hooks, forced to eat poisonous food. And the right panel continues the scenes of torture in a dark landscape dominated by flames and devilish figures.

A lot more hell than heaven, don't you think? Hieronymus Bosch's painting is really about damnation, isn't it? He brought so much more wit and creative energy to his depictions of hell than he did to images of heaven. And that's how we have been conditioned to think about what comes after death – a fearful and threatening prospect! Now you know why politicians often get elected more by appeals to fear than to hope.

The best known painting to depict the Last Judgment was painted by Michelangelo when he was called back to the Sistine Chapel by the Pope, some 25 years after he had completed his more famous ceiling fresco of scenes from the book of Genesis.



The Last Judgment covers the entire altar wall and depicts Christ's Second Coming and God's final judgment of humanity. You'll notice a brighter palette and more hopeful tone in this work, completed about 80 years after Bosch.



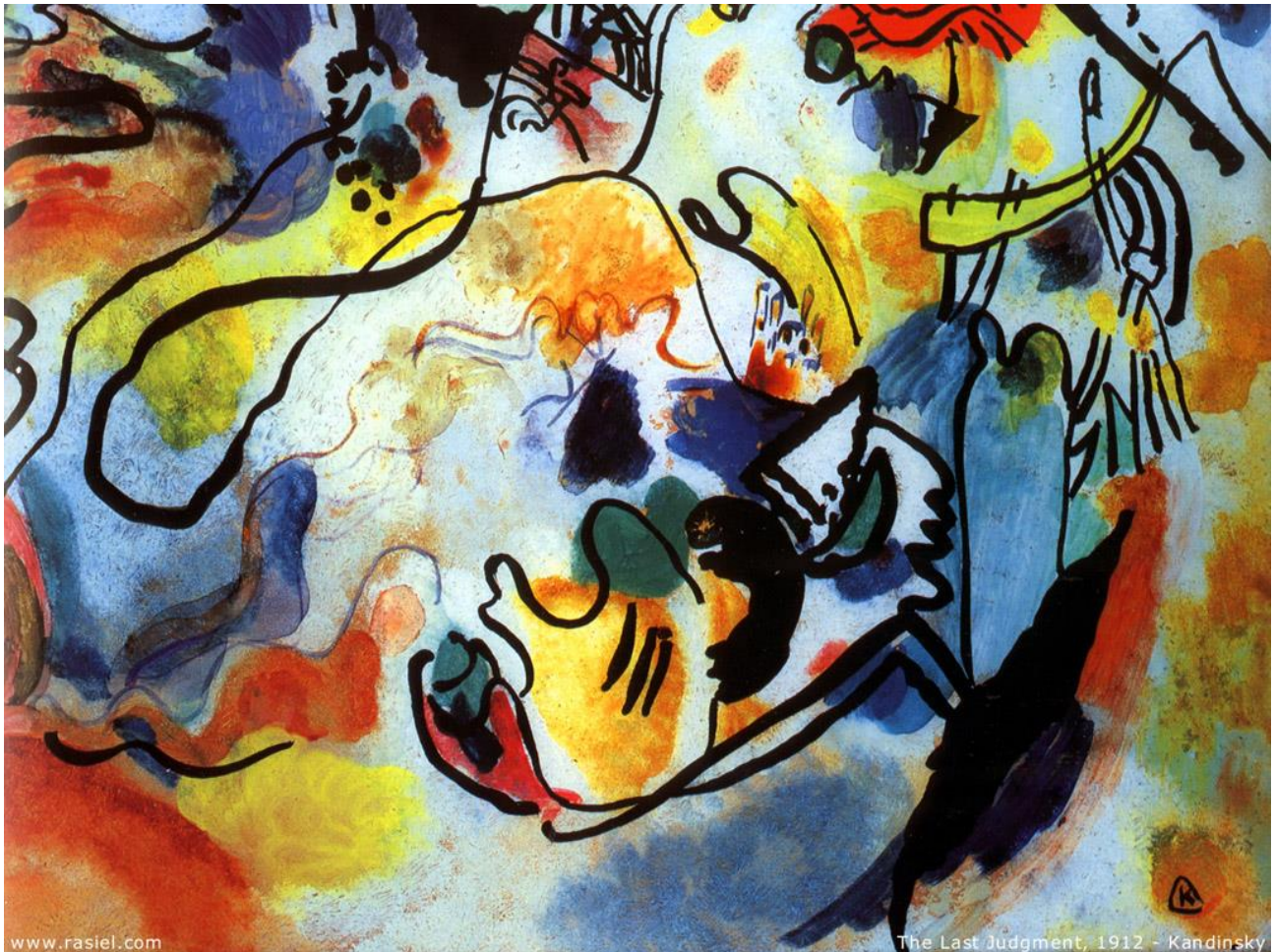
There's also a little bit of score-settling by the artist going on here – Pope Paul III's Master of Ceremonies, Biagio da Cesena, was disturbed to find his face in the painting on the character Minos, the mythological judge of the underworld. Apparently, he had angered Michelangelo and would up in the artist's hell.

More concerning to the Church was when the Council of Trent in 1563 decreed that anything "superstitious" or "lascivious" was to be avoided. So, after Michelangelo's death, an artist was sent in to paint over all visible genitalia with images of drapery. Forty figures had drapery added and two figures were completely redone. Heaven apparently was a bit too shameless for Catholic faith at the time.



How about this Last Judgment by English painter John Martin, completed in 1853? Here is a more balanced depiction of heaven and hell. If you look closely, you'll see some famous faces among the saved: Thomas More, John Wesley, Dante, George Washington, Copernicus, Newton, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Michelangelo. There are some common folk, too, among the saved. But even with a more modern artistic sensibility, Martin continues a very Middle Ages view of heaven and hell and the ultimate fate of our souls.

The final of the Last Judgment paintings I'd like you to look at comes from Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky, painted in abstract style in 1912.



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The Last Judgment, 1912 - Kandinsky

It's hard to know exactly what to say about this other than to observe that Kandinsky chose colors and forms that evoked strong emotions. And perhaps, like me, you find the abstract form liberating to our theological imaginations, allowing us to let go of the kind of Medieval nonsense that has weighed us down and been used to fill us with fear rather than faith, with dread rather than hope.

Our Epistle Reading this morning brought you the Apostle Paul's best guesses about what comes after death, none of them certain except for his unshakeable faith in the resurrection, and that the power of the resurrection extends to us. Earlier in First Corinthians, Paul puts it best: *"Ear has not heard nor eye seen nor human imagination envisioned what God has prepared for those who love the Lord"* (2:9).

I have been privileged to be present at the passing of several souls in my lifetime. I have been overwhelmed by the love with which family and friends have surrounded the one who is passing, the peace that so often descends at the final moment, and the sense of a waiting God, arms open, poised to receive with joyous welcome the return of a cherished one.

I am no closer after all those experiences to offer confident and ready depictions of the afterlife. But those experiences have nourished my faith and increased my trust in a living, loving God.

So when the Apostle Paul says in Romans that God will be "all in all," he expresses a universalism that seems much more Christian to me than the fear-mongering and hellfire and brimstone

preaching that has so dominated some Christian traditions. If a soul is a precious thing, why would God want to torment it?

And that brings us to the first part of our question of faith which has to do with “soul.”

Have you ever heard of the 21 Grams Experiment? In 1901, Duncan MacDougall, a physician from Haverhill, Massachusetts, decided to scientifically determine if a **soul** had weight. He identified six patients in nursing homes whose deaths were imminent. When the patients looked like they were close to death, their entire bed was placed on an industrial sized scale that was sensitive within two tenths of an ounce (5.6 grams). Here were his results:

- One of the patients lost weight after dying but then put the weight back on.
- Two of the other patients registered a loss of weight at death but a few minutes later lost even more weight.
- One of the patients lost "three-fourths of an ounce" (21.3 grams) in weight, coinciding with the time of death.
- MacDougall disregarded the results of another patient on the grounds the scales were "not finely adjusted" and discounted the results of another as the patient died while the equipment was still being calibrated.

MacDougall's experiment is widely regarded as flawed and unscientific and is often cited as a cautionary example of selective reporting. Despite its rejection within the scientific community, MacDougall's experiment popularized the concept that the soul has weight, and specifically that it weighs 21 grams.

What do you think the soul is? The Greeks debated between two different ideas of the soul. The first is thinking of the soul as an accumulation of roles and experiences. In this understanding, the self is like an onion, layer after layer of our accomplishments and responsibilities but without any inner core – just the layers. In this understanding the soul is your developed character, it's your story, it's your legacy and influence on others. There isn't a sense of immortality to the soul – only as it has an abiding influence on others. This could also be characterized as a more Jewish understanding of the soul.

The other way the Greeks understood the soul was as one's essence, one's core which exists before and outside of all of one's experiences, roles, successes and failures. This is perhaps more in line with what the poet Wordsworth was describing and what the Apostle Paul talked about as our spiritual bodies - the soul as a pre-existing self that will persist after the death of the body.

Which side would you be on in this debate?

In preparing for this sermon, I came across the work of the Danish artist Helle Louise Kierkegaard who paints what she calls “soul paintings.” As you glimpse some of her works, listen to her describing her process in discerning the soul of her subject.

VIDEO CLIP – Soul Paintings

Did you hear her talk about having a conversation with the person, hearing their story? It is out of their “*little story*” and, she adds, “*the energy and everything about this person*” that she begins her painting.

Where does Helle Kierkegaard land in this debate about soul? Is it a story or an indescribable spirit? An onion or an essential core? Well, in the usual intuitive spirit of the artist, she says yes to both!

Is the soul a passing legacy or something that exists in eternity? Perhaps we need to follow the example of Helle and say “yes,” even as we yearn to hear the loving words Jesus offered the criminal crucified beside him: “Today you shall be with me in paradise.”

Amen.

Sermon preached by Reverend Steve Savides at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin
Livestreamed on August 30, 2020