

HOW'S MY LIFE?

A sermon preached at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Bedford, New York, on Sunday, September 13th, the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19) by the Rector, the Reverend Terence L. Elsberry.

I

I wonder how many times this past few days we've asked, "How was your summer?" We ask because we want to know the answer. We ask because we care. We ask because summer is a big deal for us; gives us an opportunity to change our routine a little, try some alternatives, hopefully, loosen up a little.

But another question to ask, not of each other, but of ourselves might well be: "How's my life?" We might do well this fall of 2009 to ask ourselves that ever-salient question: "Just how IS my life, anyway?"

It's good from time to time to step back and take stock. Good if not to stop, then at least to slow the engine of our lives, pull over to the side and determine where are. One thing I do every few months is sit down and review my life goals. If I don't, I'm afraid I'll get off course, afraid I'll expend energy on things that aren't real priorities. What are they? What is the handful of things that matter most to me? And where am I in achieving them?

Where are YOU this morning—in YOUR life goals, in your work, in your interests, in your commitments, in your mindset? Where you are as a human being in relationship with other human beings? Where are you in relationship to God?

II

I've now lived long enough to know that life is either coming together or coming apart. I'm talking generally now. When I say "coming apart," I'm not just talking about a bad day or a bad week. I'm talking about the times in our lives when change is major: not always bad change, though sadly sometimes it is, but change. When what seemed assured no longer seems quite so likely.

I spent part of my summer break in Sun Valley, Idaho. It's a beautiful part of the world I'd never seen before: soaring mountains, quick-running streams, sparkling lakes, pine-scented woods, warm days, cool nights, low humidity, bright blue skies. Great place.

While in Sun Valley, I had three experiences that speak to what I'm talking about.

One was a fly fishing expedition Nancy and I made with friends. I've only been fly fishing twice before. This time was different. This time we went Tube Fishing. How many of you have been Tube Fishing?

If you don't know about Tube Fishing, here's how it works. You get into these waist-down rubber pants. You slip them into high wader boots. You get your fly rod—nicely outfitted by somebody who knows about rods and flies. You stand on the bank in a row with the other novices, while your guide gives you a quick casting lesson. Then you all trundle together to the side of the lake. You awkwardly—everything you do from here on out is done awkwardly, that is if you're a novice like me—you awkwardly pull this round inner tube with a center seat over your head and attach yourself to it. Then, when you're convinced you could not in any way feel more awkward and less in control, the guide says, "Now put on your flippers."

"My flippers?" you yell. "Your flippers!" the guide yells back. "Sure your flippers. How else do I think you're going to move around the pond going after fish without flippers?"

You cannot imagine, words cannot describe, thank the Lord no pictures were taken of me—boots, waders, rod and tube—now adding to the fiasco of my gear: flippers.

"Now get in the water!" roars our guide.

Splash.

Sometimes life feels awkward. Sometimes nothing fits. Sometimes nothing seems to come easily and everything feels like hard work.

(Though I have to add that from my tube and in my flippers I actually had a lot of fun and even caught a few trout, though Nancy caught more.)

Then there's another experience I had in Sun Valley and environs. I also spent part of three days hiking in the mountains. For me, hiking is a breeze. I love exercise. I love to move. I love to perspire. I love when the endorphins start hopping. I love hiking. I especially love it when you have to work at it: like on mountain trails. Add to all that great physical exertion incredibly beautiful scenic mountain vistas and I'm soaring!

Sometimes everything in your life is go. Everything's working. You can see clearly. You're in your element. You're in your zone. You're in the flow.

Then, of course, sometimes you go in and out of your zone, seemingly almost daily. Sometimes life falls apart one day and comes together the next. One thing is sure: neither mode of living—tube awkwardness or hiking soaring--lasts forever.

Wisdom reminds us that whether things are going really well or really badly, this too shall pass. I chose today's Canticle about wisdom over the usual psalm, because what I'm suggesting this morning—taking time to re-consider the state of our lives—is an act of wisdom.

We move so fast. Information bombards us at such a rapid-fire click. Knowledge overload becomes our daily fare to such a degree that we need to consciously stop, say Enough! go to a place within ourselves where we can ask the question: How is my Life?

What is this Wisdom today's Canticle is talking about? It's really just going to a place deep within ourselves where we can hear a voice deeper, surer, purer, wiser than many of the voices that keep coming our way. What the Canticle calls us to do is connect with God in such a way that we can tap into His wisdom, make use of the wise guidance He wants to give us. How beautiful are these words:

“Wisdom is a reflection of eternal light,
 a flawless mirror of God's activity,
 an image of divine goodness.
 Though Wisdom is only one,
 she can accomplish everything;
 remaining self-contained,
 she transforms all around her.
 In every generation
 Wisdom enlightens holy souls,
 making them friends of God.”(Wisdom 7:26ff)

The way you and I discover who we really are, the way we discover the role we're supposed to play in this life, the way we're sure to find the best pathway for us to follow is through intimate communion with God. It's by seeking this Holy Spirit wisdom. It's by applying it to our daily lives.

We're all on a journey. It's the journey of who we've been to who we will become. Our lives are about process, the process of becoming. Nothing stays the same. But with God's help we need not be victims of change. He can help us MANAGE the change that is ever with us, that is ever carrying us to new places.

I said there were three experiences that greatly spoke to me in Sun Valley. They were tube fishing and mountain hiking. And there was one more. For my annual continuing education, I attended the Sun Valley Writer's Conference.

This is a marvelous conference. If you've never been, I recommend it. It's a conference that brings readers and top-ranked writers together to consider ideas—ideas written in fiction, nonfiction, journalism, poetry and filmmaking. You have major talks for all the attendees (we had 800 people in attendance). There are breakout sessions for smaller group Q. and A. Readings, socializing with the writers and great fellowship round out this really intellectually-expanding experience.

What spoke to me was that many of our feature writers had experienced major life transitions. They were on the Road to Becoming writ large!

As they told the stories of the books they've written, they told the stories of their lives. They reminded us of the power of becoming the people we each have it in us to be.

There was Vartan Gregorian, who told his story of escaping Communist-dominated Eastern Europe to earn a Ph.D. at Stanford. He was so poor in school, he shaved his head to

avoid barber costs. Among other things, in his career, he's taught at UCLA, the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Texas. He's been president of the New York Public Library and Brown University and is currently president of the Carnegie Corporation.

What a journey!

Abraham Verghese is a physician and Professor of the Theory and Practice of Medicine at Stanford University School of Medicine. He has built his career around finding and presenting a more humane approach to practicing medicine. He grew up in poverty and repression as an East Indian in Ethiopia.

What a journey!

Vernon Jordan, the great-grandson of Georgia slaves, grew up in abject poverty outside Atlanta. He's had a career as a civil rights lawyer and activist. Now he's managing director of the investment bank Lazard Freres & Co.

What a journey!

Ayaan Hirsi Ali is a beautiful young woman who grew up in an extremist Islamic family in Somalia. At the age of three, she suffered genital mutilation at the hands of her grandmother. Betrothed by her father to a much older, fundamentalist Islamic cousin in Canada, Ayaan was on her way to Canada for the wedding, when in Amsterdam she escaped. She sought, and was given, political asylum. She was collaborating with the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh, when he was murdered by Islamic extremists. Her name was next on the hit list. Now she lives here in the U. S., fighting for women's rights.

What a journey!

Each one of these people I heard speak, and there were many others, have done extraordinary things in the trajectory of their lives. Their stories are stories of dramatic, life-transforming change. Their stories show the power of opportunity—opportunity we are all given at the beginning of each new day. As novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez wrote: "There is always morning, where life gives us another opportunity to make things good."

Some of these people I heard speak may have consciously sought God's wisdom along their way. Some may have not and were led by Him anyway, without even knowing it.

III

Their lives, and the lives of other people known or unknown to us, aren't the point I want to make, anyway. The point for us to consider today is the question: How is my life?

And you and I are in on a very special secret this morning. You and I have consciously available to us a glorious gift. It's a gift that's been available to the men and women of God all

through the ages, the men and women who have gone this way before us. The gift is this: you and I can ask Him for His wisdom—and know He wants to give it to us.

We can ask God for His wisdom and receive it. That's your and my number one job right now. Because all good things depend on it. Ask Him today. Say, Lord, show me where you want me to be, and help me get there. Give me your wisdom for the living of each day.

Pray this prayer and discover what a journey, what a life you can have!