**Collins Street Baptist Church June 2, 2024**

**Series: A life Worth Living**

**Reading: Psalm 90. 1 – 6, 13 - 17**

The idea for this month’s sermon series arose from something Simon read on my blog. It began with a story told by the celebrated American Rabbi, Harold Kushner. His book, *When bad things happen to good people*, became a classic. It is so insightful and helpful.

Not long after that, Harold Kushner wrote another wonderful book, called *When all you’ve ever wanted isn’t enough.* Subtitle: The search for a life that matters.

The book begins with a question, ‘Was there something I was supposed to do with my life?, and it is here that we read this story.

One night a deeply troubled man asked to meet with him: The man explained that a work colleague had died suddenly, just two weeks earlier. At the office, the colleague had already been replaced, and his wife and family had moved inter-state already.

The man reflected:

‘It’s as if he never existed. It’s like a rock falling into a pool of water. For a few seconds, it makes ripples in the water, and then the water is the same as it was before, but the rock isn’t there anymore. Rabbi, I’ve hardly slept at all since then. I can’t stop thinking that it could happen to me, that one day it *will* happen to me, and a few days later I will be forgotten as if I had never lived.

Shouldn’t a man’s life be more than that?’ (p.20)

Rabbi Kushner wrote this book soon after the death of his own father and at the time he turned 50 years of age. Kushner explores themes from the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, which asks whether indeed all of life is ‘vanity’ or eventually without consequence. **What is it, if anything, that gives our lives meaning and may also provide us with consolation as we approach its inevitable end?**

These are, of course, deeply challenging questions, the kind of things we might think about when we have a birthday, or at the turn of the year: what have we done with our time, and maybe what is its worth?

You have only to be a little bit aware of what’s going on around you to realise how transient, and fragile is our life. It is the privilege of the young to imagine ‘it will never happen to me …’

For many years I have loved a song made popular decades ago by the Canadian singer Dan Hill, best known for his song ‘Sometimes when we touch’.

It’s a great song for those of us who spent our student years in protest movements, and the idea that the times they are a-changin.

 So you flung your fists high in the ear,

 But the world remained the same.

 And all the demonstrations filtered out through graduation,

 And the times that were a-changing never changed.

 Freedom takes on new meaning, when you have a family of five.

 And peace and revolution dissolved in its own solution,

 When you’re fighting for your life just to survive.

 It’s then you’ve got to hold on, for what you believe in,

Hold on, don’t let it fade.

Still you’ve got to be strong, find yourself a reason.

You never changed the world, but just the same.

You’ve got to hold on stronger, each and every day.

Yes, indeed: Hold on: find yourself a reason: for a life worth living.

The Christian faith offers just such a reason. But it is not what you might think. No, it is not about how many toys you end up with. Neither is it about what some have called a mansion in glory, the pie in the sky when you die.

In fact it is not about any achievement at all.

It’s more fundamental than that. It is simply about what life is, no matter how long we live, or what we do, or who we think we are.

The idea of a life worth living is not about making your own life worthwhile, as if we achieve or create that. That’s actually to miss the point altogether.

Life itself is its own value.

The German American theologian Paul Tillich once said that when people ask him does he believe in life after death, he asks them do they believe in life before birth.

His point was that all life is a mystery: where we come from and where we go to is the same mystery.

It is the mystery the Bible addresses from the beginning and all through.

This is the canvas on which we might consider the question of a life worth living.

Actually, who gets to decide what is a life worth living?

We live in the context of our creator: classical theology uses the Latin phrase *coram deo* to express this: we live in the presence of God, whether we know it or not.

The Bible says it from the very start: In the beginning, God.

This God is the creator of all that is—and this God considers that it is all good. In fact, very good.

Marilynne Robinson has pointed out that the biblical creation story is the only ancient world view that sees the world as good: all good.

And as you follow the biblical stories through, even with all the wickedness that brother does to brother, the lies that people tell to others and themselves, the wars and family violence and destruction that makes up so much of the story—still and yet there is a presence, a spirit that works for justice, for hope, for life anew—always, for good.

Abraham set forth with a conviction that a nation would arise, as a witness to all the nations, of this good God, and at a time when he was already 99 years old, and still had not found that home he would finally settle in, he planted a tree, a symbol of place, and the place was named ‘the ever lasting God’. He had learned that this is where he would live. In the presence of God. Coram Deo.

Centuries later, a prophet named Jeremiah had the misfortune of trying to warn the nation that they would soon to be invaded and lose their independence, a result of their shoddy political dealings and illicit profiteering; but in the face of that doom, as they were about to go into exile, Jeremiah bought a block of land. Why would you do that?

These were symbols of a wider canvas, a vision of life that is much more than what we do and what we achieve, and what we think we are all about.

We live in the presence of an eternal, creative, redeeming love: One who will make something of our messes and our achievements, making meaning even where we think there is none.

I think the most challenging insight of Rabbi Kushner’s book is his assertion that most people are not in fact afraid of death: **we are afraid of never having lived**. The great challenge of life is to learn from our mortality, to live; to choose life.

As he reflected upon his own phase of life, Kushner observes, following the 23rd Psalm, that God does not save us from dying:

God does not redeem us from death. We will all die one day. But He redeems us from the *shadow of death*, from letting our lives be paralysed by the fear of death. He helps us prevent death from casting its shadow over the years we do have to live. (p. 161)

So we are invited to respond to this mystery of life, not by trying to create meaning, to buy meaning, or build meaning, as if somehow this will make our lives worth living.

No, what it means is simply to take hold of all that is already given to us.

It is a little recognized fact that the greatest majority of psalms are psalms of lament: anguish and complaint. The truth is: life is tough.

Yet the pattern of the psalms constantly places all this sorrow or resentment, anger or fear, in the context of this greater reality: It’s there in the Psalm we read, Psalm 90:

Lord, **you** have been our dwelling-place
   in all generations.
2 Before the mountains were brought forth,
   or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
   from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
3 You turn us back to dust,
   and say, ‘Turn back, you mortals.’
4 For a thousand years in your sight
   are like yesterday when it is past,
   or like a watch in the night.
5 You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
   like grass that is renewed in the morning;
6 in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
   in the evening it fades and withers.

Then follows plenty of anguish and bitterness, we didn’t read it all—some of it blaming God for it all. Great honesty in that! But still the writer turns to the day’s task, the things we want to do or need to do, getting on with it, and even finding some good in the tough stuff:

13 Turn, O Lord! How long?
   Have compassion on your servants!
14 Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
   so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
15 Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
   and for as many years as we have seen evil.
16 Let your work be manifest to your servants,
   and your glorious power to their children.
17 Let the favour of the Lord our God be upon us,
   and prosper for us the work of our hands—
   O prosper the work of our hands!

We live, coram deo, in the presence of God.

We live in a beautiful and fragile world.

We live where there is injustice and where there is generous care and love.

We work and live and hope that it will be worthwhile, that by the grace of God it will come to something.

You see, a life worth living is essentially about the life we are already given. We do not make it, we receive it. For us, the emphasis is on the living, the receiving and engaging, the work of our hands.

What the story of creation, and indeed the whole Bible, is saying to us is that all is given.

 The word we will use at this table, of the out-pouring of divine life, is not just the story of Jesus’ death, but also of his life, and not just his life but all life, *all creation*:

here is the great out-pouring of all life for life, all possibility for us: for exploring, receiving, giving, engaging, trying, hoping, failing, trying again,

and in it all resting in the acceptance of a love that says: No, you did not change the world, but still you have lived, for living is its own value, and living in the knowledge that all life is given, we are all children of this one family, this one household of creation—

and it is into this communion that Jesus invites us,

it is for this life together that he gave his life,

it is for this community of nations that the Spirit is poured out,

and it is in this living, no matter who we are, what we have done, or not done, it is in this living that we share a life worth living.

Amen. May it be so.