

Title: Out of Death—Life!  
Text: John 12:23-28  
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Immanuel Baptist Church  
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Trina Paulus has written a kind of picture book for adults entitled, *Hope for the Flowers*. A caterpillar named Stripe is born and after eating and getting bigger he says, “There must be more to life.” So he leaves the tree which had shaded him and fed him and finds all sorts of new things. The story writer says, “Grass and dirt and holes and tiny bugs—each fascinated him. But nothing satisfied him.”

One day he came across a great pillar of caterpillars, squirming and pushing to get to the top. Feeling a sense of excitement he joined the climb, not knowing what was at the top. He was pushed and kicked and stepped on from every direction—it was climb or be climbed on. He took a single minded approach. Other caterpillars became threats and obstacles which he turned into steps and opportunities in order to climb on them and over them. (Sort of what political candidates try to do these days)

As he climbed he became quite exasperated with it all and in the process met a yellow caterpillar. They became friends and decided to give up the climb. So Yellow and Stripe romped in the grass and ate and loved each other. It was like heaven for a while, but as time passed even hugging each other seemed a little boring. Stripe couldn't help wondering, “There must be more to life.” Yellow saw how restless he was and so she tried to make him happy and comfortable. “Just think how much better this is than that awful mess we left,” she said. Stripe answered, “But we don't know what's at the top. Maybe we were wrong to come down. Now that we are rested maybe the two of us could make it to the top.” Yellow tried to convince Stripe to stay where they were and she did for a while, but the pillar haunted Stripe. Finally Stripe could not resist the urge any longer and he went back to the caterpillar pile. Yellow, though she loved Stripe, couldn't believe that the top was worth all the risks to get there. She couldn't put it into words but she couldn't join Stripe on his climb.

Yellow was desolate without Stripe. She crawled daily to the pile looking for him and returned home sad. Finally she became numb and wandered away from everything familiar. One day she came across a grey-haired caterpillar hanging upside down on a branch. He seemed caught in some hairy stuff. “You seem in trouble,” she said. He said, “I have to do this to become a butterfly.”

When she heard the word “butterfly” her whole insides leapt. She asked, “Tell me, sir, what is a butterfly.” He said, “It's what you are meant to become. It flies with beautiful wings and joins the earth to heaven. It drinks only nectar from the flowers and carries the

seeds of love from one flower to another. Without butterflies the world would soon have few flowers.”

Yellow thought, “How can I believe there’s a butterfly inside you or me when all I see is a fuzzy worm?” Yellow asked, “How does one become a butterfly?” He said, “You must want to fly so much that you are willing to give up being a caterpillar.” “You mean to die?” asked Yellow. “Yes and No,” he answered. “What looks like you will die but what’s really you will still live. Life is changed, not taken away.” He said to Yellow, “Once you are a butterfly, you can really love—the kind of love that makes new life. It’s better than all the hugging caterpillars can do.” The grey caterpillar taught Yellow how to make a cocoon. Yellow, at first, didn’t want to give up her life as a caterpillar. She was afraid, but then she decided to act against her fear and take the risk. And in time she became a beautiful butterfly.

Meanwhile Stripe was climbing his way up the caterpillar pile to the point of exhaustion. He reached a point where it seemed like he had climbed as far as he could go. Then he heard another caterpillar say, “None of us can get any higher without getting rid of them.” Right afterward the pile began to shake and caterpillars began to fall. Frustration surged through Stripe even as was agreeing that that this was the only way up the pile. Then he heard a tiny whisper from the very top, “There’s nothing here at all!” Another said, “Quiet fool! They’ll hear you down the pillar. We’re where they want to get. That’s what’s here!” Stripe felt frozen. To be so high and not high at all! It only looked good from the bottom. Then the whisper came again, “Look over there—another pillar—and there too—everywhere!” Stripe became angry as well as frustrated, “My pillar,” he moaned, “only one of thousands. Millions of caterpillars climbing nowhere! Something is really wrong . . . but what else is there?”

Yellow eventually finds Stripe at the top of the caterpillar pile and though Stripe does not know Yellow as a butterfly, Stripe grapples with both excitement and fear when he sees this beautiful yellow butterfly. After a time of questioning and doubt, Stripe decides to give up the struggle. It was a long climb down, but Stripe makes it to the bottom and goes to sleep. When he wakes up Yellow gets Stripe to follow and Stripe discovers two cocoons hanging from a branch and somehow understands what to do. As he spins himself into a cocoon the text reads, “It got darker and darker and he was afraid. He felt he had to let go of everything . . . “ Well, you know what happens next.

Letting go, dying, giving up the climb to the top, acting against our fears by giving up our old life to start a new journey—this is the heart of salvation. This is what Jesus is talking about in our Gospel text.

This saying about losing one’s life in order to save it—John gives it his own special twist—“those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life”—is found in

slightly different form five times in the other Gospels: once in Mark, and twice each in Luke and Matthew in different contexts. The sheer number of times some form of this saying appears indicates how important this teaching was.

Jesus is not talking about literal death, but about dying to the ego and letting go of all those things that feed the ego. Professor John Hick who has written a lot on the subject of developing a Christian theology of religions points out that a central concern in all the great religious traditions is this call to transcend the ego which is the source of greed, selfishness, exploitation, and injustice and to become re-centered in God.

A number of spiritual writers call this detachment. We sometimes use the term to refer to someone who is kind of distant or aloof—we say that he or she is detached meaning that he or she is not personally engaging; but mystics and spiritual leaders use the term to speak of spiritual freedom. In order to know real freedom, to know fullness of life in God we must become detached from, we must die to, all the things that the ego looks to for identity and security. This could be any number or combination of things—such as our money and possessions, our luxuries and comforts, our likes and dislikes, our preferences in the use of our time and talents, our careers and professions. We can even become too attached to people on whom we depend for our security or identify fix. Many people are attached to their reputations and their achievements and success in their endeavors. A lot of religious people get too attached to their beliefs and ideas which they hold with a rigid sense of certainty, which often comes across as arrogance. We can get too attached to rituals and religious practices to the extent that we can't imagine worshiping God in any other way. All of these things feed our ego and foster misplaced trust and a false identity. They become part of our false self that we must die to, that we must surrender and let go of.

Letting go of these things is not like an astronaut letting go of the spaceship and floating and floundering endlessly through space. We die to our ego, we let go of our false self, so that we can trust God completely, and find our true identity and security in being a child of God. If God is our crutch, we may even need to let go of an unhealthy, obsessive kind of clinging to God so we can have a healthier, more holistic trust in God.

There is a story about a man who learned that a wise spiritual master was close by. In his curiosity he went looking for the master and was invited into the hermitage. The dwelling there was furnished with only a table, two chairs, and a bed. “Where is your other furniture?” asked the visitor. “Where is yours?” the master asked in return. Bewildered, the man responded, “I have no furniture; I’m just passing through.” “So am I,” responded the master.

I think that when we realize that all of life is grace, all is gift, and accept this, then it becomes easier to let go of all these ego attachments that we cling to and aspire for in order to make us feel important and successful and worth something. If we could just

realize how much we are loved by God and much we are worth to God as we are without anything attached then we could relinquish all these things that we think we need and must have.

In John's Gospel the death of Jesus is spoken of as Jesus' glorification. The text says, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified"—talking about Jesus' death. What would it take for us to see that our glorification is to be found not by pursuing all of these ego attachments, but in letting go, in dying to our self and ego-centeredness?

Right after Jesus says this about dying he says, "Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour." This transformation from being ego-centered to being God-centered doesn't happen without struggle. And I suspect there will be many starts and stops, many digressions and setbacks on this pilgrimage. That's okay, as long as we don't give up the journey.

Caterpillars can only become butterflies when they die to being caterpillars. We can only live in the eternal life of God as God's children when we die to the ego attachments of this world.

Gracious God,

As we partake now of the bread and the cup, remembering the death of our Lord Jesus, give us the faith and courage to risk death to all the ego needs and attachments of this world, so that we might find our identity and security in your acceptance and love. May we seek your honor, O God, and not the temporary accolades that build and boost our selfish ego. In the name of Jesus we ask this. Amen.