

One More Q & A

John 10:14-18, 27-30 (NIV)

¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷ The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father." ²⁷ My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one."

Midge always like to ask me questions about God, about God's Word. It's one of the things I most loved about her. I like getting questions, and I like answering questions. Midge would give me little homework exercises. So, to honor Midge, I thought I would do one more Q&A for her.

Question #1: Why are we here?

The answer to that question may seem pretty obvious or it may be painfully existential. To clarify the question: why are we here inside a church building? For many of us, the primary reason is to say goodbye to Midge. But maybe not just to say goodbye, but also to honor Midge. As decisions were made when Midge was drawing closer to the end of her earthly journey, there was a lot of thought given as to what "Mom" would want. Of course she would want a service in her church. She was Lutheran through and through, saved by grace alone through faith alone by Scripture alone. She would want people in church today because she wants you to have the same comfort she has – that there is a Savior from sin; his name is Christ the Lord. Midge wanted you to be here in this place today to be comforted with the comfort that only God can give.

Question #2: Why do people die?

But why do we have to gather together today? In other words, why do people die? Midge went strong for 90 years, walking her dogs, taking care of herself, still driving herself even last year. Why couldn't she just keep going? We were built to last forever; we were not built to die. So, if you think death seems unnatural, seems wrong, then you are in good company.

We were built to last forever, but something changed. It was a choice – a choice to disobey God, a choice that came from the first two people in a perfect world. God told them not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, but it looked so appealing. It looked so good to eat, so desirable for gaining wisdom. Adam and Eve went against their better judgment and listened to the devil and ate. They brought sin, imperfection, wrong-doing into the world. God promised that if they ate of that tree, they would surely die. God made good on his word. Death entered the world people being disobedient to God.

Question #3: What happens after death?

Okay, Pastor, but that's not really comforting. You just told a story that makes me feel pretty awful about death. What happens next? What happens after death? Isn't there some good news?

The Bible says that when a person dies, "the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." (Ecclesiastes 12:7) The body decays, but the soul - that spiritual component of humans – goes to God. He judges the soul. The soul that believes in God, believes that he planned and carried out their salvation, their reversal of what happened in the Garden of Eden, that soul goes to heaven. The soul that does not believe this goes to hell - a place specially prepared for the devil and the demons who follow him, a prison where spiritual beings are locked away from God and his mercy, a place of suffering beyond description.

Question #4: Where is Midge?

So, where's Midge? Everyone seeks some kind of spiritual enlightenment. They find it in religion, or they find it in philosophy, or they find it wherever they have peace of mind. But God tells us that there is only one way to have a happily ever after. Jesus claims exclusivity on eternal life when he says, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

(John 14:6) Jesus says, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand." (John 10:27-28)

This is what Midge believed. She believed that she was one of Jesus' sheep. Jesus called her his own through her baptism, that event when God clothed her with total perfection - Jesus' robe of righteousness. Whenever God looked at Midge, all he saw was perfection, not because she was so good, but because he had lived for her, died for her, rose again for her. He made her one of his sheep. He gifted her eternal life. This is a gift she received over and over again as she read the Bible, as she came to church and to Bible study. In hearing God's Word, she was showered in his grace, the underserved love that God has for all people, the God who would give his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

This is what I would remind Midge of as I visited her in her final weeks here on earth. No matter how scary death looked, no matter how out of control of the situation she was, her Good Shepherd was in complete control and had Midge in his hands. Nothing was going to tear her away from him. No matter how many assaults the devil launched to get her to doubt her faith in Jesus as her Savior, Jesus repelled them all because Jesus is stronger. Jesus was stronger because he did something that no one else ever could do. He said, "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again." (John 10:17-18) Jesus not only experienced death for Midge – laid down his life - but he conquered death itself by rising from the dead. Because her Savior lives, Midge too lives even now. She lives with her Lord and Savior in heaven, free from all pain and suffering, every tear wiped from her eyes, completely safe and secure for all eternity.

Question #5: How can we be sure that Midge is in heaven?

How can we be sure that Midge is in heaven? Well, to believe that promise, any promise, it takes faith; it takes trust. What do you believe? It takes just as much faith to say that God is a myth and that heaven isn't real as it does to actually believe that there is one almighty, all-powerful God in control of this universe who came down from heaven and lived perfectly in our place and died on the cross to take away the punishment that our sins deserved. God has never failed to keep any of his promises. He promised to take Midge to heaven. He promised that no one could snatch her out of his hand. Since he has kept all his other promises, we have every reason to believe that he kept this one as well. The Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, has taken Midge home, to the place that he prepared for her in heaven so long ago. He promised to take her there. That's how I can stand before you today and say that God most certainly took Midge to heaven.

Question #6: Where do we go from here?

We came here today to say goodbye to Midge, to honor her. We also came here today to be comforted. I could bombard you with clichés. I could tell you that she will live on in your memories, that she's not really gone as long as you remember her, but that's not the comfort God gives. God doesn't just give us words of wishful thinking that Midge is in a better place; he says that she is in the best possible place. Midge is in fact alive, even though she has passed away. She may not be here with us physically, but she is in heaven with God. She is happy – happier than she has ever been in her life. Midge is happy, and we can honestly be happy for her.

But at the same time we realize that the rest of our days will be marked without a mother, without a grandmother, a sister, a friend. She will be missed in our lives. But she was a most blessed gift from God to us all.

The best part of today is that we can see her again and be with her again. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me...and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd." (verses 14-16) Jesus wants to gather you to heaven, to be a part of his one flock. He wants you to have this gift of eternal life, the same gift that he gave to Midge. Believe as Midge believed, believe that Jesus is your Good Shepherd and has taken away your sins, and his promises to Midge are also his promises to you. No one can snatch you out of the Good Shepherd's hands. He will be with you always to the very end of the age. If we believe as Midge believed, we will see her again.

Midge knew the answers to all these questions, and now you know the answers too. If she has any more questions, she gets to now ask the Almighty face to face. What we need to know today is simply that Midge lives, even now, departed from us, but at home with the Lord. We leave here today with the peace of knowing that God loved Midge and he took her home, freed from all the pain and suffering of this world. Today you can be happy that God took Midge home, and that he loved you the same way he loved Midge and holds out the same eternal life for you that he has already given Midge. Amen.