

“Confronting Our Mortality with Honesty and Hope”
Isaiah 25:6-9; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44
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November 4, 2018

I have told some of you about a seminary classmate who revealed deep-seated superstition about death. As part of a pastoral care class, we filled out our death certificate with a date, cause and location. It was a way to help us get in touch with our own mortality before offering care to people dealing with loss. It was a helpful, if unsettling, experience.

But several weeks after the class, one student confessed to something he had done unconsciously. He had written down that he died in a car crash in a busy intersection he went through most days about a week after that particular day in class. It wasn't until quite some time after that day that he realized that without even thinking about it, on the day he had written down as his date of death, he had driven miles out of the way so that he didn't have to go through that intersection.

It is amazing how powerful superstitions can be, particularly when they are connected to deep-seated fears. We know talking about death doesn't make it happen, but we avoid talking about it as much as possible. We know writing down a date and place for our ending has no impact on reality, but we don't want to take any chances.

Death is not an easy topic for anyone, though there are cultures that embrace death more openly as a natural part of life, as revealed in Dia de los Muertos which originated in Mexico. But we live in a culture which may be the most vigorously death-denying in the world.

Part of what allows us to avoid facing our mortality is that people are living longer and dying in places where we can choose to be absent. In his insightful book *Being Mortal* physician Atul Gawande notes that as recently as 1945, most people in America died at home. But by the 1980's, just 17% did. It is easier for us to keep our distance in this place and time, to avoid dealing with death as much as possible.

And yet, we cannot ultimately avoid it. It is the one thing we all have in common. We used to say that death and taxes were the only

givens, but apparently even taxes can be avoided by some. So, we are left with death. It is not, as I say, an easy topic to address; it is not a very upbeat topic for a culture that wants only ups and more ups; but it is an inescapable reality which when avoided and denied only tends to drain us of energy. The prophet Isaiah speaks of death as a shroud that is cast over all peoples, a sheet that is spread over all nations.

So, difficult or not, death is a topic we are wise to address openly and honestly. Unsettling as it may be, there are benefits to confronting our mortality, especially if we do so in the context of Christian hope.

One thing scripture affirms is that death is a reality for all of us. In Genesis 3:19 God says to the archetypal first man, “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” We repeat these words at burial services because they remind us of our mortality. Death is a part of life for all of us.

Isaiah recognizes the ubiquity and weightiness of death. We don’t know when these verses are written, perhaps as late as the post-exilic period, which would mean the author or editor writes with awareness of the horrors of warfare and exile. We do know the context for the vision in Revelation of a day when death will be no more, when mourning and crying and tears will be no more. It is a context of persecution.

Death is a reality for all of us, scripture argues, and in Judeo-Christian faith, though death is part of life as God orders things, it is not a friend, minor nuisance or happy passageway. It is a hard stop which separates us from those we love. This is why, in the familiar reading from John 11, Jesus weeps at the death of his friend Lazarus. Indeed, the text says he groans in pain or is deeply disturbed in spirit.

Many efforts have been made to find some reason why Jesus isn’t really torn up with grief. He knows he will raise Lazarus, he knows he will be resurrected, he believes in eternal life! He does, but still he grieves because death separates us from those we love in this life.

What this means for us is that it is “O.K.” to grieve. If Jesus weeps at death, so will we, no matter how strong our faith is. It means we miss someone dear and it means we have known love which is a good thing. In *The Battle of the Five Armies*, the last of the films based on Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*, after a dwarf she has loved dies in battle, the elf Tauriel,

weeps bitterly and says, “If this is love, I do not want it. Take it away, please. Why does it hurt so much?” The elder elf Thranduil, who has opposed this unusual relationship, finally displays compassion in replying, “Because it was real. Because it was real.”

The only way to avoid grief is to avoid love which isn't much of an option. So, we might as well face it, face our sadness, face our mortality, face the reality of death. While it doesn't take away all the fear and sadness, simply acknowledging that death is part of life takes away some of its power. It brings our feelings out into the open where we can deal with them and find help when we need it.

Which brings us to the next thing scripture affirms about death – it does not have the final word on life. The same Jesus who raises Lazarus is raised from the dead as a sign of our hope in eternity. The author of Revelation envisions a day when death will be no more. Even Isaiah says there will come a day when God will swallow up death forever and wipe away the tears from all faces.

This may seem odd to us. For many have the assumption that there is no hope for eternity in Judaism, faith is all about this life, and that is where the emphasis is, but as with most matters, there are multiple perspectives on eternal life within Jewish thought. We joke that if you ask three Baptists what we believe about anything, you will get at least four opinions. The same is true of rabbis and Jewish thought. Varied perspectives are embraced even on a matter as significant as eternity.

I learned this through an undergraduate class I guest-lectured in at Wake Forest University. It was taught by my friend Charles Kimball and explored different faith perspectives on eternity. This was the class where I started to quote a mentor in saying that the three most profound words on eternal life were spoken by Gomer Pyle. Before I could get out the punchline, Charles stopped me and asked the class how many of them knew who Gomer Pyle was. About three out of twenty students raised their hands... I finished the line anyway. The three most profound words were – surprise, surprise, surprise!

In the end, the students talked about how similar the rabbi who lectured and I were and how different we were from the imam. The

rabbi talked about different views on eternal life all the way from no belief to strong belief. I talked about a consistent affirmation of eternity, as God has the final word in resurrection, allowing life to begin again, but I also named the tension in scripture as to whether this happens at death or some future date of resurrection, and I said eternity is beyond human comprehension. So, the rabbi and I left room for mystery. The imam presented a view where everything was nailed down.

But all three traditions speak of life beyond death. Our tradition certainly does. Death does not have the final word on life. God does. And God's word gives us hope for something more. There are other things that can help us when we grieve, but nothing helps quite as much as our hope for eternity.

As a result, we are able to confront our mortality more openly. It is one thing to find the courage to confront a dark and dismal truth - life will end at some point for all of us and all we love. Perhaps we can do so without any hope of afterlife and find space for meaning, a reason to take each day more seriously as the precious gift that it is. But even one of the great existentialists who did not believe in God or any possibility of an afterlife once said that facing death with these beliefs was like looking into a bottomless well. All he saw was utter darkness. So, he chose to live as if there was a God and an afterlife.

So it goes for us. Facing death without any hope of eternity is a dark and dismal task. But embracing hope, not simply pretending, but believing in the depths of our being, makes all the difference.

My pastoral care professor, Andy Lester, wrote about the power of future stories to shape present experience. Our perspective on the future of our economy shapes our willingness to invest money today. Our beliefs about the future impact of climate change affect our decisions today. In the stories of resurrection, Andy argued, we have the greatest future stories of all. They are filled with mystery, they cannot be nailed down, but they are liberating, empowering, transforming. The God who creates us in love sees enduring value in us and thus will one day wipe away death completely. This not only changes our perspective on the future; it alters the way we live in the present.

The reading from John ends with Jesus saying to the family of Lazarus, “Unbind him, and let him go.” It is powerful image, a reference to the literal unbinding of burial cloths so that a man who has died but now is alive can walk free. But it is also a powerful image for us in a more metaphorical sense. Our hope in the resurrection unbinds us from the restrictions our fear of death places upon us.

As early Christians believed that in baptism they died not only to sin but to all its wages, including death, we die to fear when we embrace the hope of eternity. This doesn't mean we cease to shed tears. That is still a future hope. It means we are no longer bound by fear. Rather we live each day embracing our mortality but trusting that death will not have the final word and thus living toward love and compassion regardless of the consequences.

Once we know death is not the end, we are free to live more fully, to follow the Christ who lived, died and was raised to set us free.