

DEATH AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

⁵Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother's womb, so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything. ⁶In the morning sow your seed, and at evening do not let your hands be idle; for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good. ⁷Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. ⁸Even those who live many years should rejoice in them all; yet let them remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity. ⁹Rejoice, young man, while you are young, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. ¹⁰Banish anxiety from your mind, and put away pain from your body; for youth and the dawn of life are vanity. ¹²Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no pleasure in them"; ¹³The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. ¹⁴For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.

(Ecclesiastes 11:5-12:1, 13-14, NRSV)

"One death is a tragedy; a million is a statistic," according to the maniacal Soviet dictator, Joseph Stalin, who sent millions to their graves—this a tragedy and a statistic. In one sense he was right of course. When we read the statistics about how many people die every year from world

hunger our eyes may glaze over, but if a neglected child starves on Long Island we may feel outrage. Emotionally, statistics may be difficult to grasp whereas a story of personal tragedy easily grabs our hearts and minds.

From time to time, this reality gets brought home when a particularly tragic death makes the headlines. Over the past several weeks our papers have reported several such stories—the student from Boston, Imette St. Guillen, who was murdered in the city, the baby in Hempstead whose remains were found in the street, and Dana Reeve, widow of Christopher Reeve, who died of cancer, leaving behind a 13-year-old son.

Closer to home, one week ago 11-year-old, P. J. Furlong, died of a sudden brain aneurysm. He was a 5th grader at Munsey Park School. While P. J. was a member of another church, many in our church and community have been deeply saddened by his untimely death. Many people I saw this week, young and old alike, spoke of their grief at the news of P. J.'s death. This community-wide mourning reminded me of John Donne's famous words from *Meditation XVII*, "No [person] is an island, entire of itself; every [person] is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less...any [person's] death diminishes me, because I am involved in [humankind], and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee" (adapted).

I have a friend whose 100-year-old grandfather died this week. They were very close and she feels the loss deeply. Even in her grief though, she said, "We knew he wouldn't live forever, but we hoped he would. But his death is not a tragedy like that of the 11-year-old boy who died this week."

We all know our days are numbered. We all know that the bell will toll for us one day, but we cannot dwell on this reality. A fixation on our own mortality robs life of its joy. Likewise, living in denial of death keeps us out of touch with one of the most significant facts of life. However, a healthy acknowledgement of life's finitude can help us appreciate each day as a gift. I've always liked the line from a Frederick Buechner novel where he says, "It's best to make friends with the inevitable while there is still time."

The author of today's scripture lesson from the Book of Ecclesiastes tried various approaches to life before making peace with the inevitable. While traditionally the author was thought to be Solomon, son of David, many modern scholars reject this notion because the language and tenor of the book date it somewhere around 300 BC, centuries after Solomon's death (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible, NRSV*, p. 841). "The name of the book, and ultimately the author, derives from the Hebrew *Qoheleth*. In Hebrew the root *qhl* has to do with an assembly or congregation...The name then would seem to mean 'leader of an assembly'" (Ibid.). For our purposes today we will call this leader, *Qoheleth*.

As the book opens, *Qoheleth* decides to investigate both "Wisdom (i.e. the path of patience and restraint) and Folly (hedonism and reckless abandon)" (*The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, P. Achtemeier editor, p. 259). As a young man he pursues excessive alcohol and sex but does not find life's answers there. Later he sinks his teeth into intellectual pursuits to become as smart as possible, only to conclude that this too is vanity. In despair he proclaims that everything is vanity. The Hebrew *hebel* actually does not mean "vanity," rather "something fleeting and futile, utterly insubstantial" (Ibid.). By the end of the book *Qoheleth* seems to have aged and achieved some measure of wisdom and insight into the meaning of life including, "Even those who live many years should rejoice in them all...Remember your creator in the

days of your youth, before the days of trouble come...The end of the matter; all has been heard. Respect God and keep God's commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil."

In the face of death, how do we find meaning in life? Our lives need an overarching purpose. We need to live deliberately and with direction lest in the breakneck speed of life we become like the airline pilot who radioed the control tower saying, "I'm lost, but I'm making great time" (Joan Delaplane, "Live the Hyphen Fully," *The Living Pulpit*, Vol. 7 # 3, p. 36). Wasn't it Jesus who said to his disciples, "I have come that you might have life, and that you might have it more abundantly, that you might have it to the full"? How do we live full and meaningful lives before the bell tolls for us? What keeps us from living fully?

Fear. Writer Ted Loder says, "Fear has spooked me into a hundred hiding places" (*Ibid.*). Seminary professor, Joan Delaplane, notes that we experience "Fear of what others think of us; fear of 'failure'; fear of not being in control, fear of the new and different" (*Ibid.*). Anxiety and fear undermine the joy and meaning God intends for us. Making peace with our mortality and realizing that our lives are forever held in the palm of God's hand can reduce our anxiety and deepen our joy.

Delaplane notes that, "Besides fear, perhaps we're still burdened by baggage from the past: hurts, betrayals, disappointments" (*Ibid.*). Sometimes we need a therapist or others to help us work through the pain of the past. Finding the courage to begin the healing process and persevere even when it hurts is a gift to those we love and to ourselves. Being at peace with the past helps us find meaning in the present and gives us hope for the future.

Delaplane says that, “One of the gifts that people who are suffering offer us is the daily awareness of the fragility and finiteness of life. When good health and energy are ours, there can be a tendency to lose perspective about life and things that really matter. A short time ago a friend [Pete] told me how his boss came to work one day, had a heart attack and died right then and there. Pete said: ‘That’s the way I’d like to go; but I’d like a little preparation time.’ I had to respond: ‘You know, Pete, I think that’s exactly what God is giving us right now—a little preparation time’” (Ibid. p. 37).

Every minute before our time comes to meet God face to face is preparation time. The choices we make hour by hour, day by day, determine the path of our lives. And the path that we choose determines our destiny. We cannot wait until tomorrow to start living the way we’ve always dreamed. Today is the day to grasp life, embrace life, and live life to the fullest. It was John Henry Newman who said, “Fear not that your life will come to an end, but rather that it shall never have a beginning” (Ibid.).

What then are we to do on those days when we are either overwhelmed by life’s staggering statistics or deeply saddened by the death of a single person? First, let us reach out to God in faith whatever amount we can muster, believing much or believing little, but forever reminding ourselves that God is love and some day, in this life or most certainly in the life to come, all will be well. Second, let us reach out to other people, all wounded in one way or another, to both give and seek support, to both give and receive love. Many in our community have done this for P.J.’s family this past week.

At another place in *Meditation XVII*, John Donne writes, “All [humankind] is of one author, and is one volume; when one [person] dies, one chapter is not torn out

of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated; God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God's hand is in every translation, and [God's] hand shall bind up all our scattered [pages] again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another" (adapted). So let it be. AMEN.

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The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

“God of compassion, in sorrow, we receive from you the comfort you alone can give. Enable us to see that you are always working for our good. You are our dwelling place, O God, and underneath us are your everlasting arms. Assure us of your love that we may be able to accept what we cannot understand. Help us to be aware not only of the shadows of death, but also of the splendor of life eternal. Enable us even now to face life with courage; give us the grace and the strength to go on, knowing that the great cloud of witnesses surrounds us. Comfort and uphold us, until we share together the light of your glory and the peace of your eternal presence; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**”

(Adapted from *Book of Common Worship*, p. 1030)