

Science and Being Mortal

Psalm 90:1-4,10,12

Faith and Science #4

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*God , you have been our dwelling place
in all generations.*

*Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*

*You turn us back to dust, and say,
"Turn back, you mortals."
For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.*

...

*The days of our life are seventy years,
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
even then their span is only toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.*

...

*So teach us to number our days
that we may gain a wise heart.* Psalm 90:1-4,10,12 NRSV

For most of human history, death was a common ever present possibility. If I was writing this sermon in 2019, I would say we have become increasingly detached from the reality of being mortal as a culture and country. I do think these past 18 months of the pandemic changed some of that. The scientists and doctors told us to stay home to be safe, to keep our health, so we did and hoped we would not face hospitalization or death. We prayed to God for one another, for strength, patience, health and perseverance.

Maybe we have thought a bit more about our mortality because of the pandemic. Death came to over 700,000 people in our country alone because of the virus. And people we loved died in these last 18 months of illness, or heart attacks or cancer or accidents. We had to think about and feel the weight of their mortality and ours. We prayed for each other, for comfort.

Now here we are in a new chapter of the pandemic. Scientists, researchers and doctors gave us a path to life – vaccinations. My guess is that now that we are at this point in Marin with a 97% vaccination rate here, we may shift our focus back to living each day, being grateful,

pondering hopes for connection and celebrating and serving and reflecting on some of the lessons learned during the pandemic of life, death and being mortal.

"Teach us to number our days," prays the psalmist, "that we may gain a wise heart."

But what does it mean "to number our days"?

In 2015 I picked up the New York Times bestselling book *Being Mortal: Illness, Medicine and What Matters in the End*. The author of this book is a surgeon and a professor at Harvard Medical School by the name of Dr. Atul Gawande. And the book is a very frank physician's description of what it is like for us, as human beings, to come to the end of life. It is a book about what it means to grow old and what it means for our bodies to change and wear down. I found it helpful and powerful. It gave me language to use as a pastor when offering pastoral care to members, of the church and families. However, I had a few friends who when, they got about halfway through the book, confessed to me, "You know, this book scares the heck out of me!"

I understand. What frightens people most of us, I suppose, about this book is right there in the book's title: Being Mortal. We are all mortal. We know that, of course, but we know it in the abstract. There is an old Jewish saying, "Everybody knows they're going to die, but nobody believes it."

What can be frightening about this book is that the author makes us believe it, by forcing us to face the practical reality of being mortal, to face facts that we usually try to keep out of our minds: to face the truth that we are all aging, there's no way around it, no way to stop it; that despite all the vitamins and exercise and healthy diets and strong medicines in the world, our minds and our bodies will ultimately decline and fail; that we will all eventually come to the end of our days.

When we are young, most of us don't think much about the end of life. It seems so far away that it doesn't even seem real. It's something that happens to other people--to old people--but it's not a part of our experience, not our concern. But, we do grow older. Even so, we may still try to pretend that we are somehow immune to the aging process, exempt from mortality.

"Teach us to number our days," says the psalmist. But what does it mean?

One answer to that question comes to us from modern medicine. For scientific medicine, what it means to number our days is essentially to count them...and then to make that number as large as possible--to postpone aging and death and to extend the length of life as far as we can. Historians tell us that the average citizen of the Roman Empire could expect to live a little less than 30 years. But today, medical science--through antibiotics and surgical breakthroughs, improved hygiene and nutrition--has made it possible for the average North American to live

almost three times that long. And we can pray that someday the ravages of heart disease, cancer, Alzheimer's, and other diseases will also be a thing of the past.

So one way to "number our days" is to count them and to try to make the number larger and larger. But notice that the psalmist prays to God to "teach us to number our days that we may gain a wise heart," not simply that the number will get bigger, but rather "that we may gain a wise heart." In other words, the psalmist reminds us that when we look at life through the eyes of faith, the goal is not simply the quantity of life, but the quality of life--the depth and breadth and height of life, not just its length. What makes life good is not just longevity, not just living more and more days, but becoming a certain kind of person, a person whose heart is wise before God.

And it is right at this point that our faith raises a provocative challenge to modern medicine. While people of faith join with all others in giving thanks for the many ways that medicine gives us strength and health and freedom from unrelenting pain, what must be challenged is the false idea that the only way to seek a good life is the never-ending quest for more of it, for more and more days, for longer and longer lives. (1)

At its best I think the Christian faith and theology, & a spiritual life that is deep and wide across many spiritual traditions, acknowledges the truth and credibility of the laboratory science while recognizing that some things are true in ways that can't be measured or weighed.

There are questions that faith seeks to answer that science does not. How might we face our mortality in ways that gives a richness to life now? How might we face our fears about death and our grief over those we love who have died? What might be different as we hold scientific realities about life and health and death alongside an awareness of life and Divine presence? How do we do that individually and how do we do this as a church?

In my time as your pastor, I have seen you as a congregation walk with each other in life, in dying, in grieving. Often this process is personal and private. It so hard to receive a serious diagnosis. Doctors try not to give too many guesses about how long a person might live. Instead there are hopes for many good days, of good living. I notice how people respect that. There are offers to be present, to listen, to cry together, to tell stories. Although we may not use the words, we are asking "Where is God in this and how can we help each other be open to that presence, that peace, that love?"

I have been reading a book that describes one particular congregation in Minneapolis and their pastor. I want to share some insights *The Deepest Belonging* by Kara Root has given to me as we reflect on how we as people who value science and who are aware of the presence of the Divine live fully and face our mortality.

Marty was a member of the church. He had been coming for about 5 years. One day he came to talk to the pastor and show her test results. It turned out he had multiple tumors in his lungs “too numerous to count” the report said. Chemo was possible so that was the next step and beyond that they did not know. After some deep conversations, Marty felt invited and called to share his journey of living and dying with the congregation.

Marty lived these days in a suspended Sabbath time. He no longer measured his life by what he accomplished; he no longer measured it at all. He no longer compared or competed or focused his life on doing. Instead he lived in his being. He simply was. He received each day as a gift, as awake to the presence of God and of others as he could be. He was poignantly aware of what an astonishing thing it is to be alive. Marty had stopped all the striving and climbing and saving his own life. His life was already lost. And so, in the freedom of that, he rested. He rested in the love of friends and the love of God. He was held in grace. He belonged to us and to God; we belonged to him and to God. Our sharing his suffering together held all of us in an experience of profound grace.... (2)

There were times he was sad or scared or depressed or in pain. He was honest about that.

When the question came up about how he would know when it was time to go into hospice, we listened to him. He didn't really know. And then he said “When I can no longer leave my house” – that was a big marker for him. Independence and the ability to get out and do things was what made life worth living for Marty. It gave him joy. When there was not more joy left to living... he would know he was nearing the end so that became his sign. (3)

He met regularly with his care team from the church, with his pastor and with his medical care team. She writes – *These meetings were precious, holy. His emotion was transparent. He was living more vulnerably than I had ever seen anyone live.*

He was not afraid. He was not counting his days, but was showing how one person could gain and grow a wise and loving heart and share it with others day by day. There were some very rough days along the way. He showed his church family how to live the paradoxes of science and faith, life and death, fully alive and fully mortal.

There are so many paradoxes in the Bible. Jesus is fully human, fully divine. We are individuals and yet Paul describes the church as the living Body of Christ. We die and yet death is not the end. Death is the natural end of earthly life. And yet it is not the end. The love that connects to the source of Love and to each other does not end. In the end, life – the unbroken connection to God and each other in love – triumphs, continues, endures. This life is made complete. The whole of who we each are, alongside each other and all creation, is brought forever into the eternal love of God. We are mortal and we are more.

Our treasure, our legacy, is our life, secure and made alive in God. Our life is a gift of love meant to be used and shared, meant to be lived fully, generously and fearlessly in this world and forever in the presence of eternal love. Amen.

- 1) Rev. Thomas Long, "Number our Days," Day 1 Faith and Science Series Part 7
<https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003d32/view>
- 2) Rev. Kara Root, *The Deepest Belonging: A Story about Discovering Where God Meets Us*.
Fortress Press, 2021. Pg. 183
- 3) Root. Pg. 185