



Sermons from Poland Presbyterian Church

“Death: In the Midst of Life”

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Psalm 39

August 5, 2007

**Lord, make me to know mine end....
that I may know how frail I am.**

--Psalm 39:4 (KJV)

Let us pray: *Lord, as you have spoken to your people countless times in the past, speak to us today. Enable us by your Holy Spirit to hear your message of life, and hearing, to respond as you would have us do, with faith, and hope and grace. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*

At the beginning of the week I had a different sermon planned for today, but when on Wednesday night I turned on the TV and saw the news of the bridge collapse in Minneapolis, I felt I needed to make an adjustment.

I've traveled over the I-35W bridge a number of times. Perhaps you have as well. Anyway over the last few nights I've awakened in the middle of the night several times thinking about what it must have been like: -- the sudden, lurching break-up and collapse of the bridge in a mere 5 seconds. In a plane-crash a plane may plummet from the sky earthward and sometimes there is time enough for prayer – but here there was virtually no time at all....other than perhaps a cry of help, “O God, help!!!” as the bridge split apart like an accordion and fell.

Then I've thought too about the poor people whose cars submerged under the river: Trapped, endeavoring to kick open a window, unable to see in the murky depths, and even if they managed somehow to break open a window and escape, how they would still

have wondered which way even was up in the dark water and would have been cut by pieces of submerged re-bar.

In the face of a tragedy like a bridge collapse one hopes to say most of the right things. How does one deal with unscripted death? How do we deal with the irrational and immutable judgments of death unprepared, unexpected, un-welcome?

I always end memorial services and funerals with the prayer long associated with Cardinal Newman:

O Lord, support us all the day long of this troublesome life, until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then, in thy great mercy, grant us a safe lodging, a holy rest, and peace at the last.

There is in Celtic mythology the notion of “thin places” – thin places in the universe, where the visible and the invisible world come into their closest proximity. To seek such places is the vocation of the wise and the good, and those who find them find the clearest communication between the temporal and the eternal. The encounter of suffering, and especially the encounter of death, ushers us into a thin place. Suffering, death, tragedy (especially sudden tragedy, but really all loss) -- is the ultimate thin place of human experience.

Psalm 39, our text this morning, in the King James reading contains these words “*Lord, make me to know mine end....that I may know how frail I am.*” (Psalm 39:4, KJV)

The bridge collapse in Minneapolis drives indelibly home our all-too-human-frailty, drives home how quickly our lives can be turned upside down.

“*In the midst of life,*” reads the Burial Office from the Book of Common Prayer, --- “*In the midst of life, we are in death.*” That’s a rather grim thought isn’t it? --- to be reminded in the midst of our busy lives, -- lives devoted to building monuments that will endure, --- that “*in the midst of life we are in death.*” It somehow feels rude, bad form to put it so bluntly, so blatantly.

There is a flippant old World War I ditty that the British Tommies used to sing which goes:

The bells of hell go ting-a-ling-a ling
For you but not for me;
O death, where is thy sting-a-ling-a-ling,
Where grave thy victory?

That probably expresses the approach of most of us with respect to death – *denial*. How could it be otherwise? Were we to dwell constantly on the fact that we’re here today but gone tomorrow we’d go crazy. I read recently about a church that some years ago, on All

Saints Day, gave a presentation of Hugo Distler's *Dance of Death*. Perhaps some of you know it: A white-faced Death danced down the aisles of the church, confronting all estates and classes and inviting them to dance with him. Rich man, rich woman, doctor, lawyer, pastor, teacher, homemaker, artist, businessman and businesswoman, student – all were called, and all found it hard to believe that the summons was for them but it was. *"In the midst of life we are in death."*

This is a disturbing sentiment, and so we speak of death in whispers. When we come right down to it, however, the main point of our Christian faith, the main point to the Christian gospel, the authentic and real and main message that it communicates to us, concerns not so much how to live the good life or to deal with the bad life as it concerns a new attitude toward death; that because of Christ's triumph over the grave, we can share in that promise of new life, resurrection life, eternal life. Therefore, rather than avoid death, the Christian confronts it, accepts it, and realizes that death is a comma rather than a period.

We have this hope within us, and we must never, never let go of it. But that said, there is value too in reflecting on the limits of life, on the limits of your life and mine....That we haven't forever and a day....That we have to make the time we have here count.

That's why I find David's words here so refreshingly and bracingly honest, so bracingly direct. He asks pleadingly of God, *"Lord, make me to know the measure of my days, that I may know how frail I am"*; or as it is rendered in the Great Bible, *"Lord, let me know the number of my days, that I may be certified as to how long I have to live."*

Someone has said that death is nature's way of telling us to slow down, and that may be, but the question of our text is one of confrontation rather than avoidance. "How long do I have, Lord; let me know so that I can set my affairs in order." If I were to paraphrase the text, we might make it read: *"Lord, remind me of my weakness, my frailty, that what I do and get is all temporary, and in the time I have left, let me serve you well."*

This, then, is a text about limitations and opportunities, and we must be reminded of our limitations. As the King James renders here, *"For man walketh in a vain shadow and disquieteth himself in vain. He heapeth up riches and cannot tell who shall gather them"* (Psalm 39:6).

You can't take it with you, we are told, but many have tried. The Egyptians buried their pharaohs together with servants and riches and tools and all the things of this life so that they could carry on without interruption in the next. Somehow, the acquiring of worldly goods deserved a better end than to be left to the state or to undeserving relatives, and yet they provided only fodder for grave robbers. The heaping of riches is a vain show, for as the old say goes, "The richest man in death needs but two pennies for his eyes."

The acquiring of great wealth, great influence, great power, the gifts of this world in profusion – these vanities remain to entice someone else to their acquisition. I read

somewhere about a woman who had herself buried in a prized Corvette. How long will it be before someone digs her Corvette up?

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust; dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return.” If this were all David had on his heart in this prayer you’d feel that life were one fatalistic game of Monopoly, and just as sure as you go to Park Place and Boardwalk, you must go to jail. But David’s remembrance of his frailty here, his remembrance of his limits, of his mortality --- rather than intimidating him into a cringing submission to fate and the inevitable, --- stimulates him to the useful employment of time. *“And now, Lord, what is my hope? My hope is in thee. O spare me a little, that I may recover my strength before I go hence and be no more”* (Psalm 39:12-13, KJV).

He wants, in other words, to make his life count. He isn’t ready to quit. He feels he has more to do, that his life is incomplete. He wants to do things *right*. David doesn’t feel his life is complete. He speaks for all of us in this, doesn’t he? Which of us doesn’t feel – if our life ended today – that our life is like an “unfinished symphony? We yearn to do more and be more. Until death comes we just have to live life with that sense of the incomplete, that we aren’t quite ready, that there is still more to do and be.

I think of graduate students who work on their theses and who spend years gathering materials, reading the works of other people, conferring with advisers and colleagues. Often they don’t dare begin to write a page, for surely someone somewhere has already hit upon their idea or there is more and more evidence to be discovered, or they need to check out just one more series of notes.

Preparation is fine, but preparation that inhibits action until one is 100 percent certain means that nothing is ever done, and in the case of the thesis, it never gets written. One has to make a start, a stab, and one has to learn to live with the tensions of tentativeness. Only so much rehearsal, and a piece must be sung if it is to live at all. Only so much preparation, and a life must be lived if it is to be a life at all.

It is not the perfection of our efforts so much as the persistence with which we try again and again that marks the quality of our living. We have to know our limits, but within them the options are ours to contemplate.

The quality of our living is determined in large measure by the attitude we take toward our dying. The calmness, the composure, the equanimity with which we are able to face the gut-wrenching times comes of believing that as amazing this life is with all its wonders and fears, that it isn’t the whole story, the complete story – that there is *more to come* – indeed, that the best is to come! And so, with David, we can pray, *“And now, Lord, what is my hope? My hope is in thee.”*

I remember hearing about a woman who was laid to rest in her coffin holding a fork in her right hand. It was an unusual sight. A grandchild asked her grandfather about it: “Grandpapa, why is grandma holding a fork in her hand?”

Her grandfather (who had been married to his late wife for over 50 years) said to her, “Well, darling, your grandmother always used to leave her fork on her plate as a sign that she was looking forward to dessert. She’d always say with a smile, putting her fork on the plate: ‘The best is yet to come.’ And she’d then pick up that fork when it was time for dessert. Well, darling, grandmama went to be with Jesus, and she said before she went that she wanted to be buried holding that fork in hand because for her life with Jesus, life in heaven is going to be like having dessert.”

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ,” Saint Peter says. *“By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are guarded through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time”* (I Peter 1:3-5).

“In the midst of life, we are in death.”

We rejoice with those who have run their course, and we pray now for the strength to run our own.

Closing Prayer

Lord, help us to know our end.
To know our limits, to know our mortal frame.
Give us the faith and the strength of courage we need.
That we may arise in light –
--not just on that great and wonderful day
when we all shall see you face to face
but also today – in our places of need.
In Christ’s name. Amen.