

February 7, 2021 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Psalm 90:1–6,12](#)

TITLE: **Mortality, Yet More**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

This past Christmas one of the gifts I received was the book Wolf Hall, Hilary Mantel's historical fiction about Thomas Cromwell, the ill-fated advisor to King Henry VIII. Spoiler alert: In one of the early chapters, Cromwell wife dies suddenly from a viral plague, something they called "the contagion" or "the sweats." She died within the course of a single day, following the grim timetable of that plague: "merry at breakfast, dead by noon." The history of the Middle Ages is full of details about pandemics and plagues. It is estimated that 1/3 of the Western World died from the bubonic plague. In the 14th century, it killed half of Paris, two-thirds of Venice, and three-fifths of Florence. There are stories of people going to bed well but dying before they awoke—of doctors catching the disease at a patient's bedside and dying right there beside them. The wealthy fled the cities to increase their chance of survival, while the poor had no other options and bore the brunt of the pandemic's brutal toll. One writer in Siena, Italy wrote that "no bells tolled and nobody wept no matter what [their] loss because almost everyone expected death and [believed] it was the end of the world."¹

When Cromwell's wife died, they hung a bunch of straw outside the front door. It was a warning that "the sweats" had claimed another victim and people should stay away. It's a striking image and one we can relate to. We spend most of our days behind locked doors; people are quarantined and avoid (like the plague) any extra contact with others. By now more than 450,000 have died in America from Covid-19. A year ago the virus seemed more theoretical than threatening. We heard reports of deaths and growing numbers of infections, but it was something over there—in China, Italy, Seattle, New York. But by this past fall, all of us knew someone who'd caught the virus—perhaps even who'd died from the virus. It became very real and personal.

Here's what I find striking. We've found lots of ways to talk about the coronavirus. Some talk about it politically—foolishly arguing over the efficacy of wearing masks. Some talk about it in terms of disruptions—not getting to eat at favorite restaurants, having to cancel wedding plans and do ceremonies via Zoom. Some rightly name the unjust aspects of the pandemic—the excessive toll it's taken on communities of color, women in the workplace and people with limited financial resources. And some have talked about its personal toll—the lingering grief of not celebrating holidays with family or being unable to mourn deaths in person. But for all this talk, I've found us relatively unable to speak about the coronavirus pandemic from a faith perspective. And part of that comes from our inability to honestly talk about human mortality—which is odd, since we are mortal ourselves and we profess faith in Jesus Christ whose death we remember every time we share the sacrament of communion.

So let's talk for a moment about human mortality. Every human life is finite. It has a beginning and an end. As it says in Ecclesiastes 3, there is a time to be born and a time to die. We don't know the precise end date for our life, but an end date does exist. In

Psalm 90:10, the poet suggests that “the days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong.” Life expectancy rates are better now than they were in 2000 B.C., but the sentiment is essentially accurate. Just like it says in the hymn “Our God Our Help in Ages Past” verse 4: *Time like an ever-rolling stream soon bears us all away; we fly forgotten as a dream dies at the opening day.*

We often turn to humor to deal with the unsettling topic of our own mortality. We tell jokes about St. Peter at the pearly gates; how the good news is that the golf courses in heaven are beautiful beyond imagining, but the bad news is your tee time is for 8:30 tomorrow morning. Lance Morrow once wrote that death is nature’s way of telling you to slow down, or at least not be so angry all the time.² Scripture talks a lot about death and mortality, but its language tends to focus on the brevity of our time on earth. Isaiah 40 says “*All people are grass; the grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows upon it.*” Jesus, in his Sermon on the Mount, talked about the grass of the field that is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven and then asked “Can you add a single hour to your span of life by worrying?” (Matthew 6:27) Then there’s the famous line in Psalm 90:12— “[O God] teach us to number our days that we may gain a wise heart.” To which Martin Luther cried out in reply, “Lord that we all might be such skilled mathematicians.”³

Learning to number our days—to accept our mortality—goes against most of our core instincts. We don’t like limits. We don’t like long lines at supermarkets. We don’t like giving up our car keys when we can no longer safely drive. Yet life has limits; immortality is never an option for us. We are born and in time our bodies wear out and we die, as is true of all things on earth. Which is why faith language is so important for this conversation.

Faith reminds us that God is with us, right beside us, as we grapple with the question of our mortality. We don’t shout these questions up into an uncaring, impassive universe. No, we ponder, even fret over these things, to a God who hears, who loves us, and who is near. Psalm 23’s most powerful verse is likely verse 4: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.* The reality of God being near to us gives us the courage to accept our mortality without rejecting life simply because we are mortal. Learning to number our days is not simply the awareness that at some point life ends, but to see life as allotted time full of opportunity and possibility given freely to us by a God who is ever with us.⁴

Faith first says, we are mortal yet God is with us. Faith also says, we are mortal but God is eternal—therefore the canvas upon which our brief life’s artwork is recorded is not limited but stretches from age to age. We heard the words of Psalm 90 talk about how our lives are like grass that flourishes in the morning but fades and withers in the evening. But that same psalm begins with this assurance of faith: *Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.* Mortality is not defined by the limit of death. We are part of something bigger, longer,

everlasting—for we belong to God and God isn't done with this old world yet. Not by a long shot.

First, we are mortal yet God is with us. Second, we are mortal, yet God is eternal. So third, when we remember our mortality faithfully, when we number our days against the backdrop of a loving God who is eternal, then we gain wisdom for the living of these days. We are mortal, yet so much more. It is that message which is at the heart of the communion meal we celebrate. We call this meal a “last supper” because it was Jesus’ last meal, completed just before he was arrested, crucified, and ended his earthly life; in the language of the Apostle’s Creed, he “*suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried.*” It is a sacrament intentionally designed to remind us of human mortality—of sacrifice, grief and loss that is part of our brief life. It is about mortality yet so much more.

Think about the words of institution for communion. They were given to us by the apostle Paul and are found in I Corinthians chapter 11. Some version of them is spoken every time we celebrate this sacrament. Jesus extends the bread saying “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me. This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this in remembrance of me.” The body cannot survive if it is broken, torn apart and given to others. Blood, once poured out, can no longer sustain a person. Communion is about mortality, about a life coming to an end. But it is also about something more—something that is captured in the last line of the words of institution: *As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.* We name mortality without mortality being the end of the story. The one who died is the one who rose from the grave. The one who came once is the one who will come again. The story of Jesus’ life—and of our life—is not a brief span of years bookended by birth and death. The story is much more—a mystery of God’s love and care and resurrection hope that extends from everlasting to everlasting.

We are mortal creatures, but we are so much more than that. We grieve the 450,000 that have died from Covid, for the premature ending of their lives and losses to so many families. We rightly celebrate the warp speed development of vaccines, even as we denounce the tortoise speed ineptitude that didn’t take the virus seriously or establish national measures to protect innocent people. We know that life is short and fragile, but this doesn’t fill us with apathy in the face of injustice, racism, violence against people or against this planet. No, it energizes us to work for change, to do what is right, right now—because our allotted time is short and our days are numbered. For the work at hand, we need sustenance—bread, wine, a communion meal that connects us to Christ and to one another. Because our story is far from over. Friends, remember the good news: *With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* (Brief Statement of Faith)

¹ Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*, 1978, p. 95.

² Lance Morrow, *Heart*, p. 116.

³ Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles*, p. 31.

⁴ Patrick Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*, pp. 128-9.