

February 27, 2022
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Transfiguration, Year C
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Joel 2:1-2,12-17
Psalm 103 or 103:8-14
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” In other words, “You’re going to die.” Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, maybe not for a very long time. Even so, make no mistake, you are going to die.

Ash Wednesday is our annual reminder that every one of us exists on the edge of a precipice. My family became permanently more attuned to that fact after Jakki became a chaplain, and especially after she began working in the emergency department. As a result, she has curtailed some of my activities, and I now possess a bit of ED gallows humor. Here’s an example. You may know that Halloween is a big deal in our neighborhood, Spring Glen in Hamden. Several families create elaborate scenes in their front yards. A few years ago, I suggested to Jakki that we decorate our front yard with a collection of items: ladder, snow shovel, chainsaw, bicycle, step ladder. Accompanying them would be a sign: “Random instruments of death.” We haven’t yet followed through, but there’s always this year.

Among creatures, the consciousness of the inevitability of death, as far as I know, is a uniquely human trait. Recently my dog Wiley—that’s short for Wile E. Coyote of *Roadrunner* fame—was diagnosed with an aggressive type of cancer. He was displaying no symptoms; a veterinarian discovered it during a routine exam. I had begun to notice in him a gradual slight slowing down, but no more than might be expected for a ten-year-old dog. As of today, Wiley is his usual cheerful, gregarious, companionable self.

He has no idea what’s coming. I almost envy him that. Wiley is going merrily on his way, but Jakki and I are not. At least for now, Wiley *is* his usual cheerful, gregarious, companionable self. In contrast, Jakki and I have entered a heightened state of domestic alert. This is not because of the necessary extra vet appointments and treatment decisions. It’s because we are anticipating Wiley’s death, which will come sooner rather than later. Wiley has no idea what’s coming, but *we do, we know*. This human *knowing* is a miraculous thing—and it’s a burden. Some days, I would rather be more like Wiley.

Human knowing as burden: in the biblical origin stories, I hear the voices of our ancestors wrestling with that. Genesis 2 says this: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’”¹

Imagine reading Genesis as if you had never read or heard of it before. You would get to those words and totally just *know* that it will *not* end well. That's the thing, right? Adam and Eve are a little thick, but they're literary tools, after all. We are not literary tools so we *know*; we can see the dotted lines. And there are so many dotted lines. The knowledge of good and evil, which encompasses so much else: like it or not, we humans have it. And it's the source of a lifetime of small metaphorical deaths.

All this leads us to the other major theme of Ash Wednesday, besides death: repentance. Because we *know*, we can be held responsible when things go wrong. Repentance, what some call "amendment of life," will be with us through Lent. Actually, I suppose it's always with us to some degree. The connection between death and repentance is often made this way: you will die, so you better fix yourself while you can, so you don't burn in hell for all eternity. Unfortunately, that kind of rhetoric has been turned to all sorts of nefarious purposes. It's not right, and it's not the point. I think the point is this: you will die; meanwhile, you can choose to live more abundantly. The key is being honest about what that means and how to attain it.

It was Benjamin Franklin who said this: "... in in this world, nothing is certain except death and taxes." Actually, Jeff Bezos has proven Ben wrong. It turns out that, in this world, nothing is certain except death." Oh, but wait. It turns out that, in addition to space flight, Jeff Bezos is working on immortality. He is among the handful Silicon Valley tech moguls identified by *The New York Times* in an article titled, "The Men Who Want to Live Forever." That article opens with this: "Would you like to live forever? Some billionaires, already invincible in every other way, have decided that they also deserve not to die. Today several biotech companies, fueled by Silicon Valley fortunes, are devoted to 'life extension'—or as some put it, to solving 'the problem of death.'"² It seems to me that the outcome will be bleak for all but the uber-wealthy. Therefore I rather like the title of a related story from *The Guardian*: "Is Silicon Valley's quest for immortality a fate worse than death?"³

I probably don't need to point out that our culture is generally uncomfortable with death. The denial of death or even of decline is an important marketing strategy that is very easy to buy into. But here's the thing: the denial of death has always been a privileged luxury. It is a luxury that people of color can't afford. It's a luxury that poor people cannot afford. It's a luxury that disabled people cannot afford. It's tempting to say that the coronavirus pandemic was a great equalizer. That's *sort of* true: for nearly two years, death has been perilously close to everyone. But it's not *exactly* true. Yes, death *has* been unusually close to people who are white or wealthy or typically abled. But it has been frightfully *closer* for people who are of color or poor or atypically abled.

Silicon Valley's quest for immortality aside, at least for now, no amount of privilege is enough: in the end, the playing field of death is as level as a soccer pitch. You're going to die. I'm going to die. I like to think I'm okay with that, though I hope it won't be any time soon. One implication of being Christian is, of course, that I actually *need* to die in order to get to the next thing, which is reputed to be even better. Still, for me, there's more going on. My future absence will make space for someone else to grow. There is deep resonance in that. If we humans can embrace making space *one day*, then we might become better at making space *today*.

I'd rather *know* that *not know* about Wiley's cancer diagnosis, even though it is a burden in some ways. I took the dogs hiking on Presidents Day. Wiley was as enthusiastic as ever, and I appreciated our hike more than ever. He's getting a lot of pets these days, therefore, so am I.

In ladders, snow shovels, chainsaws, bicycles, step ladders, and everywhere, death is lurking, waiting to shatter us. Deep down, we *know*. We *know* exactly because we were made in the image of God. Maybe God is also always re-making us, helping us to be people who live without regret. On Ash Wednesday, God shatters us, but then God reassembles us, and we are beautiful.

Notes

¹ Genesis 2:15-17 NRSV.

² Dara Horn, "The Men Who Want to Live Forever," *The New York Times*, January 25, 2018, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/25/opinion/sunday/silicon-valley-immortality.html> (accessed March 2, 2022). See also Tad Friend, "Silicon Valley's Quest to Live Forever," *The New Yorker*, March 27, 2017, available online at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/04/03/silicon-valleys-quest-to-live-forever> (accessed March 2, 2022).

³ Adam Gabbatt, "Is Silicon Valley's quest for immortality a fate worse than death?" *The Guardian*, February 23, 2019, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/feb/22/silicon-valley-immortality-blood-infusion-gene-therapy> (accessed March 2, 2022).