

When Time is Short

Genesis 50:15-26

November 12, 2023

While away with family this summer, I read Timothy Beal's powerful and challenging book, *When Time is Short: Finding Our Way in the Anthropocene*. In some ways, it was an odd selection for a vacation read. Beal is a professor of religion at Case Western Reserve University, and the book, in the words of one review, is "an invitation to face our collective finitude." In other words, you are going to die. Me too. All of us.

This may seem morbid, and that is particularly the case when denial of death is so ubiquitous among us. Did you happen to see the Barbie movie this summer? The turning point in the movie comes when the illusion of perfection is pierced. It happens in the middle of one of those glittery dance parties that you can imagine whether you've seen the film or not. Music is pulsing at the Barbie Dream House. Heads are bobbing. Smiles are on every face. And Barbie gleefully raises her voice above the noise to say, "Do you guys ever think about dying?" The music cuts out. The record player screeches to a halt. Silence in the crowd.

Ignoring the reality of death is a constant temptation among us. And yet we do think about dying, and the truth is that acknowledging our inevitable demise is one way we clarify our current priorities. It is as true for individuals as it is for the whole human family.

How would your decisions, your words and actions, your relationships change if you believed your time was short? What kind of clarity would it bring to your life if you held always in your heart the reality that it would end? How might it change our collective and communal behavior if we welcomed this as a topic of conversation and reflection?

The Old Testament Psalmist poetically names the brevity of life this way: "Our years come to an end like a sigh...they are soon gone and we fly away"

When this brief chapter of earthly life is complete, what does remain? What will endure?

I confess this may seem like an incongruous theme for the launch of our annual commitment campaign, when we ask you—members and friends of Second Church—to give generously so that the ministry of this congregation will long endure, will grow and thrive for decades yet to come, for centuries yet to come, to continue the work of our church. Why give your money away when everything you love is coming to an end regardless of what you do? Why not, to quote another part of the Good Book, "Eat, drink, and be merry?"

This morning's scripture narrates the end of Joseph's life. We picked up the story just after the death and burial of his father Jacob, the patriarch of the family, father of the twelve tribes of Israel. You might remember that Jacob's obvious preference for Joseph provoked the jealous and angry actions of his brothers, who considered briefly killing him before ultimately selling Joseph into slavery in Egypt. Through a series of dramatic twists and turns, Joseph becomes prince of all Egypt. And eventually, his brothers and his father end up there as well, refugees from the severe drought and famine in their homeland of Canaan. When Jacob dies, Joseph weeps for 40 days. He then carries his father's body back to Canaan for burial. When Joseph returns to Egypt, his brothers fearfully await his next move.

That fear is well-founded. The brother they traumatized now holds power over their future, their families, their very lives. In a dramatic and ironic twist of the narrative, the brother they sold into slavery now hears his brothers say, "We are your slaves." And anyone who has read this far in the story would not be shocked if Joseph had those brothers imprisoned, sent packing, or worse. But something has changed in Joseph, something his brothers do not expect. You can hear it in his words. The brothers run to Joseph. They beg him to forgive them, to remember their father, and to act with compassion for his sake. And when he hears them, Joseph, that abused brother and viceroy of all Egypt, begins to weep. It is perhaps the most poignant moment in all of scripture. He extends forgiveness. He promises to care for his brothers and their children in the land of Egypt. And in a wonderful example of scriptural understatement, the author of Genesis neatly summarizes the encounter, "In this way he reassured them." If the removal of a death sentence offers reassurance, Genesis is spot on.

But why? Why did Joseph do it? What has changed in him?

I think I know. I think Joseph has learned that time is short. Sigmund Freud said that the most important day in the life of any man is the day his father dies. And having lost his own father, Joseph begins to consider what kind of legacy he will leave. Think of this: Joseph has now achieved far more than he ever could have imagined. He has risen to the heights of power in the greatest empire in the world. He has acquired immense wealth and privileged status. His life would be deemed nothing but success by any earthly measure. It's time for the eating, time for the drinking, time for the merry making. But burying his father reframes Joseph's perspective. Stepping back, he sees the providence of God at work in his life: "Even though you intended to do me harm, God has used it for good..." And now Joseph will use the rest of his life to do the good that has been done for him.

This moment of reconciliation between estranged brothers commences a final chapter of Joseph's story, focused entirely on leaving the world better than he found it. Joseph lives to rock his great-grandchildren on his knee. He passes on the promise that God will lead them out of Egypt. He asks his brothers to carry his bones to the Promised Land, the final resting place of his beloved father. And so, Joseph's wild and winding journey leads him all the way back to what always matters most. He dies surrounded by the family he preserved, the family whose future he secured.

Wow. What a story. Joseph's life becomes a testament to what will last. And it is not privilege. It is not power. It is not possessions. It is forgiveness. It is relationship. It is faith and hope and love.

So back to us. Next Sunday in this space, we will be invited to offer our commitments to the church for the year ahead. They're a symbol. A symbol of the hope we hold. A token. A sign of the world we want to leave behind. Why? Why do we give?

I'll speak personally. With the passage of time, I am increasingly convinced that the work we're doing together is of immense importance. When our family considers the call to be good stewards of what we have, this ministry, this church, takes priority because we know the impact it has. We see with our eyes and know in our hearts the daily efforts to nourish, support, and empower our neighbors. We hear with our ears and listen with our souls to the stories of lives transformed here by an encounter with the living God. We know that many in our community depend on the mission of Second for sustenance, for partnership, for hope.

But there's more than that. I think it not too dramatic to suggest that what we are about in here is ensuring the future of a faith that is both broad and deep enough to offer a compelling vision to the world. I think this because I've heard it three times in the last ten days. I heard it from a teenager, from a new member, and from a seasoned elder. Their comments

went something like this: There is a deep frustration about the way Christian faith, this gift that we have received, is being used as a weapon or a wedge to divide us from one another. There is grief and anger over the co-opting of scripture for the purpose of self-promotion or to claim God's own voice for our particular cause. One of these members confessed that he struggles to call himself a Christian for fear of the baggage that it carries. But he continued, "Then, I come to Second, and I worship and I serve with this community. And I am reminded what following Jesus is actually about."

We give to support that vision, that mission, that impact, that future.

Look, none of us is promised another day. That reality hit home two weeks ago when a friend and colleague, who served as pastor of Highland Park Presbyterian Church in Dallas, died in his sleep. Bryan was forty-four years old. He was physically strong. He leaves three young children. At his Memorial Service, his wife Alyson described how Bryan made the most of the time he was given, having no idea it would be so brief.

When time is short, priorities come into focus. How should we live? Not a decade from now or after retirement or when the grandkids are grown. How should we live right now? What kind of faith will find a home in the hearts of our children right now? In what ways are we called to serve and to give, not in the future, but right now while it's still in our hands?

Just a few minutes after I finished reading Timothy Beal's book, our six-year-old son Ben and I were walking one of the trails in Montreat. We came across a stone, a large stone on the pathway with a dedication plaque. A memorial to a boy who loved Montreat and died far too young. Unfortunately for me in the moment, Ben is learning to read. And so, he asked lots of questions. *Lots* of questions. I did my very best to explain in a way I thought he could understand, and I thought I had mostly succeeded when Ben fell silent.

We continued walking, but then nearly an hour later, still walking the trails, Ben turned to me. "Dad, when you die, I want you to turn into a graveyard so that I can remember you. And when I die, I will be in the same one since we are buddies, okay?" He continued, "This is making me cry a little, so I don't want to talk about it anymore. But I'm not scared about it." As you might imagine, the rest of the hike was pretty quiet.

Yes, our years come to an end like a sigh. You will die. I will die.

Our time is so short. Our call so clear.

So, this week, consider what has been placed in your hands. Do your part to secure a future for the faith that has inspired you with a message that the world needs to hear. Live in the knowledge of life's brevity and beauty, and do not be afraid. For God's hands hold us all.