

MEMENTO MORI

Luke 13:1-9

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The poet Mary Oliver says, “Listen, are you breathing just a little, and *calling it a life?*”

The second century bishop Irenaeus says, “The glory of God is a human being who is fully alive.”

Jesus says, “I came that you may have life and have it more abundantly.”

How do we find our way to that life that truly is life? More than survival, more than getting through the days. How do we learn to fully live, with enthusiasm and passion? How do we honor the gift that God has given us, rather than squander it or fritter it away?

Ironically, many wise people through the ages have come to believe that the best way for us to stop sleepwalking through life is to face the fact that we are mortal, that we will die. The Latin term is “memento mori”, which means, “remember that you will die”, or even “remember that you **must** die.” Spiritual teachers of every generation tell us that remembering the fact of our death helps us cultivate our love for God and prioritize our life and values before God. It’s rooted in Psalm 90 which says, “Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” It may seem counter-intuitive, but people who practice the art of “memento mori” find it to be not morbid and depressing, but - rather - life-giving and God-centering.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross was a groundbreaking thinker on grief; you have probably heard of her book, On Death and Dying, in which she described her theory of the five stages of grief. She also wrote this, “It is not the end of the physical body that should worry us. Rather, our concern must be to **live while we’re alive** - to release our inner selves from the spiritual death that comes from living behind a facade.”

When we face the fact that life is fragile, our lives can take on a sense of urgency and meaning. Somehow we see our priorities differently. We find ourselves newly motivated to accomplish a goal, to try something new, to say the things we’ve been putting off.

When Kate Bowler was 35 years old, with a very young child, she was diagnosed with Stage 4 colon cancer and was told that her chances of survival were slim. (I’m happy to report that she is now 44 years old and in full remission.) But in those weeks and months as she contemplated the fact that she might well die before turning 40, she wrote an article about the idea of a bucket list. A bucket list, she said, disguises a dark question as a challenge: “What do you want to do before you die?” We all want, in the words of Henry David Thoreau, “to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.”

Bowler is a church historian, so she discovered that there is an ancient spiritual form of the bucket list. Since the fourth century, Christians have been traveling to places made sacred by Jesus and the saints. Throughout the medieval era, people have made pilgrimages to see burial sites, relics, churches and shrines from Canterbury to Jerusalem. Even today, the walk across southern France and northern Spain called the Camino de Santiago is hugely popular; several of our church members have walked

all or portions of it. A pilgrimage to a place that stirs your heart can be a memorable journey.

As we all know, there is no end to the number of places we can travel or adventures we can tally, depending on our health and our credit limits. But what Kate found, when she was spending more time in the hospital bed than anywhere else, was that bucket lists can easily miss the point. We start focusing on countries or states visited, concerts attended, books read, whatever. All the externals. It's easier to **count those items** than it is to listen to our own hearts and **know what really counts**.

In our gospel reading for today, Jesus tells a story about a fig tree as a way to help us think about what matters most, about our fruitfulness, about the fragility of life. The passage, though, starts in a more difficult place.

Two terrible tragedies had happened in Jerusalem. One in the temple, the other near a place called the pool of Siloam. In the first instance, Pilate, the Roman Governor, had killed some Galileans who were making sacrifices at the temple, and then he mixed their blood with the sacrifices. No doubt this was a warning to other Jews to remember that Rome was in charge. In the other incident, a tower fell on people near the pool of Siloam, killing 18 people who simply happened to be there. How can such things be explained? How do we explain gratuitous violence? Natural disasters? Cancer that comes to the person who eats right and exercises? Bad things happening to good people?

We want the world to be logical, to make sense, to follow some set of rules. We want to see a cause and effect pattern for every good and every evil. We long to make sense of senseless tragedies and search for reasons even when there are none.

Jesus answers our questions, as he often does, with a story. He doesn't explain - he just points, observing, with us, that yes, death sometimes comes suddenly. Whether from violence or random acts of nature, both kinds of events lead us to realize how precarious our existence is.

Life's fragility gives it urgency. Jesus turns attention away from disasters, victims and the "why" questions. Life's fragility demands urgency, he says. Life carves out opportunities for us to live in God's graciousness, to change our hearts and lives. The word used here means to turn around - to adopt a different perspective, a new way of seeing things.

A man has a fig tree and every year he looks for it to produce figs. After three years with no figs, he says to his gardener, "Cut it down! It's using up the soil's nutrients but it isn't producing any fruit." The gardener says to the man, "Let's give it one more year."

Some people who first heard this parable might have remembered something John the Baptist said before Jesus was baptized - "every tree that does not bear fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

Some people might have heard this parable and thought to themselves - Jesus has been with us three years - are **we** bearing fruit? Have we changed our perspective,

repented, turned our lives around? Or are we actually **more** resistant to his message than we were in the beginning?

We might hear this parable and think, “Wait, I know who the gardener is. The gardener is Jesus - the risen Christ who appears to Mary in the garden.” He’s giving US another chance. He wants this to be the year for figs.

One of my preaching professors, Tom Long, grew up in Georgia. He says that there was a story the older folks in his hometown loved to tell again and again, laughing over it and savoring it and embellishing it. The tale involved a certain Sunday night in October of 1938. Evening prayer services were in full swing when a man named Sam, a member of the congregation who lived down the road from the church, charged into the prayer meeting trembling with fear and excitement. Finally gaining the breath to speak, he shouted, “Martians are attacking the earth in spaceships! Some of them have already landed in New Jersey!” The preacher halted in mid sentence; the congregation stared at Sam blankly. “I swear,” he said. “I heard it on the radio.”

What Sam had heard, of course, was Orson Welles’ radio production of War of the Worlds, but no one in the congregation knew that at the time. No one quite knew what to do and the preacher didn’t quite know what to say. Finally, a farmer, one of the oldest members of the congregation stood up and said, “I suspect that what Sam says isn’t completely true, but if it is true, we’re in the right place here in church. Let’s just go on with it.” And they did.

When we’re aware of the uncertainty of our days and the fragility of life, we ask ourselves, “**What** matters most? **Who** matters most? **What really counts?**”

When time is short, do we succumb to doom and gloom? Or do we dig deep so that we can produce the fruit that is only ours to produce?

This is an earthy parable. If we know anything about how things grow, we know that it will probably involve smelly fertilizer, and the painful pruning back of any branches that don't look quite healthy enough. Writing on this passage hundreds of years ago, St. Augustine wryly commented, "Manure is a symbol of humility."

What would we say if the gardener were to ask us this hard question: "Are you bearing fruit, or are you just taking up space?" Are you just breathing a little and calling it a life?