

## Other Kinds of Life

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The seed of today's sermon comes to us courtesy of my rideshare driver, Gregg. Not quite an ancient witness, but as someone who believes God is still speaking, I often hear the divine in my human interactions.

I happened to ride with Gregg about a week before Halloween, when the fall colors were at their peak and the snow hadn't come yet. And as he's making small talk about the leaves and the weather, he says, "it's too bad every species doesn't get more beautiful as it's dying."

Now, most of y'all know me primarily as the children's director here at the church, so you may not know that death is kind of my jam. As one of the final stages of my seminary education, I'm currently near the middle of a year-long internship as a hospice chaplain.

It may seem incongruous that someone who finds such joy and meaning in spending time with folks who are at the

beginning of their lives would also be passionate about the end of life, but if you've done both, you probably realize the similarities. In both spaces, time is precious, filters are minimal, and most people who aren't themselves at the beginning or end of life are a little terrified of going near it.

So Gregg's statement struck me a little more personally and profoundly than he probably intended. I thought immediately of some people I've encountered through hospice. The person who can't eat or speak or see, but can still hear, and how that person just relaxes and glows when someone puts on a little Aretha Franklin. People who smile at me the entire visit, or tell me about a recent visit from a long-dead loved one.

I can't say these people have gotten *more* beautiful as they come to the end of their time here, but I can tell you they are all uniquely exquisite. And I can also say that I think sometimes it's easier for a person like a chaplain who is first encountering them at this stage of life to be able to see some of that beauty. When it's our own loved one that we've watched decline, when we know how they used to be, there's usually too much pain and grief and fear to be able to see what an outsider sees.

That's completely normal and natural. In the reading this morning from Matthew, Jesus asks "And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" It's meant to be rhetorical, but even if we know the answer, we're going to worry when someone or something we love is dying.

Now another side of what Gregg said about the autumn leaves is the fact that the trees aren't actually dying, right? The leaves are, but the trees usually come back again with new signs of life in the spring. And the leaves that fall go on to nurture other life in the ground. I just finished a book called "Life Everlasting: The Animal Way of Death." In it, the author writes, "Like any good ecologist, I regard death as changing into other kinds of life. Death is, among other things, also a wild celebration of renewal, with our substance hosting the party."

He's speaking pretty literally about what becomes of the remains of something that was once living and now has stopped. It happens on a relatively small scale with the fallen leaves, and on an almost incomprehensibly grand scale when a whale dies. Under the right conditions, when a whale dies in the ocean, the result is something called whale fall. I won't go into too much

detail, in case y'all don't find this quite as fascinating as I do, but the takeaway is that as the remains of the whale descend deeper into the ocean, it feeds different kinds of critters, many of them which scientist have only ever seen in whale fall. They cannot exist without it. None of them are whales, or even mammals. Most aren't even vertebrates. But without the whale first being a whale and living its whale life, these other kinds of life could never come into being and flourish.

This thing that happens with the physical remains of whales and leaves and every living thing that stops living, it happens with organizations and ideas and knowledge and the essence of humanity, too. For us to keep building on what came before, to constantly strive for a more just, peaceful, generous, abundant way of living, those things that came before often have to pass on, to be transformed.

I read a story recently about a church in Minnesota that saw its numbers and resources dwindling and decided to just pour everything they had into helping their neighbors make home repairs. There were a lot of folks around them who couldn't afford to make updates to keep themselves or their families safe,

and the church folks had the necessary skills and decided to go for it. Over time, they made a name for themselves in the community and they saw their attendance quadruple.

Now I'm not telling this story to say we should do the same. That church's path is their own, not ours. The headline for the version of this story I read said, "Peace Lutheran staved off death by taking 'love thy neighbor' to a radical extreme." But I would argue that church didn't stave off death. It died, and turned into other kinds of life. It's not the same church it was before; it just happens to be in the same building.

I think this church has done that, too, many times over the last century and a half. I think right now, we're in a period of whale fall. Fresh nourishment abounds. Anything is possible. We absolutely could not be who we are without what came before, but we are also something entirely new. The thing that came before has passed, and the ways of sustaining it that worked so well before have to change, too. We're not a magnificent whale at the end of its life, doing what it has to in order to survive. We're a fabulous, teeming colony of mussels and clams and sea snails and all kinds of fascinating creatures.

The shape of our world has changed, is changing, will keep changing. Now is the time to dream big and love boldly.

Next Sunday is the first day of Advent, New Year's Day for the church calendar. Advent is traditionally a time of waiting and preparation for the Christmas season that begins December 25. I am personally a huge Advent nerd. It's a great paradox, that I get so excited about a season that's meant for slowing down and being intentional and not rushing things, that I try to take on a dozen different ways of simplifying and slowing down, ultimately completely undermining the whole thing.

This year, I invite you to join me in one simple daily practice. Now, after the service next week, every household will have the chance to take home a jar full of suggestions for simple daily activities. Just pull out one a day and try to follow the directions. These are things like "call a friend you haven't talked to in a long time" or "say a prayer today for a specific group in need." I think one of them says "bake a loaf of bread," which I can tell you right now I will not be doing, but I could manage some drop biscuits or some other thing I personally enjoy

making that smells nice. Let's not get too caught up in the details.

But even more importantly than these little things, I want you to wake up each day and ask yourself, "what can't wait?" Maybe it's something very personal, like connecting with someone you've grown apart from, or crossing something off your to-do list that's been hanging over your head. Maybe it's something bigger: the environment, racial justice, breaking open the concentration camps on our border, waging peace in every corner of creation.

There's a concept I try to embrace called "memento mori," remember your death. The most popular version of this comes to us from the medieval Christian church, so it's often loaded up with baggage about heaven and hell, but I don't think it has to be. The second half of the that phrase is "memento vivere," remember your life. I think that by remembering this current existence as we know it will come to an end, regardless of our personal beliefs about what happens after, can help us live our best day every day, however many days we have. It can spur us

to action, or to let go of grudges, or just to enjoy the particular way the sunlight hits the snow.

Whatever it is that your heart tells you can't wait, listen to it, and do what you can, but not more than you can. Imagine yourself blossoming and flourishing from the gifts of the people and groups that have gone on before us. Imagine the ways your gifts are going to feed all those after us. Embrace becoming other kinds of life, so you can make the most of this one.