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**“Being Mortal”
A sermon by Marilyn Hedgpeth**

**Ash Wednesday (Year B)
February 14, 2018
Isaiah 58: 1-12, Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21**

Our church’s Faith and Community Class recently spent two Sundays watching the documentary, *I’ll Be Me*, which follows singer-songwriter, Glen Campbell on his farewell tour after he is diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. The film has that poignant, yet grace-filled combination of the tragic decline of an extraordinarily gifted man, juxtaposed to the beautiful, supportive and adoring love of family and fans.

It was my second time seeing the documentary, yet I still cried during the whole second half of the film. What’s wrong with me, I thought?

But when the lights came up as the film ended, and I turned to face the class, just about everyone else in Watts-Hill Hall had tears welling in their eyes.

One of the class members commented to me afterwards “That was scary!”

Perhaps that’s because our mortality is a frightening topic.

And it can be depressingly daunting, when you consider the full spectrum of possibility:

from losing your mental faculties, as your body stays strong,

to having your earthly tent, your body, decline, even as your mind

stays perfectly viable. No wonder our culture tends to be in denial of death.

Atul Gawande, a surgeon and professor at Harvard Medical School, who self-identifies

as Dr. Informative, as a healer, a fixer, a go-all-out

for the best possible outcome-er,

was so struck by his own father's experience of mortality, that he wrote a book

called *Being Mortal*, about how understanding the finitude and limits

of one's time on earth can be a gift, if we can view it as such. Can we?

Mortality can be a treacherous subject, but I find Ash Wednesday, the beginning

of Lent, to be the dark portal to a season for reflection and action

around issues of mortality.

On this day, on this dark day, we humble ourselves and place dirty smudges of ash

on our foreheads as a sign of our *being mortal*.

However, if we can pass through this day's cross-shaped portal,

owning up to our ashen mortality, then we begin to detect the resurrection light

that beckons from just beyond.

What has its genesis as common dust in the Creator's hands, sparked

and enlivened by the gift of God's breath to life, returns to dust,

and to the Breath-Giver also as gift, if we can view our mortality in that way.

Being mortal is our lot in life. But it is also our common lot, the lot of each of us.

It is what makes all humanity cling together, this being mortal.

Mary Oliver ends one of her poems with this stanza on mortality:

Of course I wake up finally

thinking how wonderful to be who I am,

made out of earth and water,

my own thoughts, my own fingerprints –

all that glorious temporary stuff.

(Oliver, Mary. *Devotions*. "On Meditating, Sort Of". p. 22)

Lent, just beyond today's smudged portal, is our opportunity to face our mortality,

so that when suffering comes, in whatever form it takes, we can recognize it

for what it is, and have some tools in hand, like prayer, like fasting,

like almsgiving, to find in this earthly pilgrimage its deepest meanings.

The word *Lent* is the shortened form of the Old English word *lencten*,

meaning spring season, or the lengthening of days.

Lent is the six weeks, approximately, before Easter, when light returns
into our lives, as the days grow longer, at least in the northern hemisphere.
So, on the other side of the dark portal of Ash Wednesday,
there is Lent,
and there is Easter,
and there is the dawn of righteousness
that God brought forth through the dark death and bright resurrection
of Jesus Christ, and the subsequent death and resurrection,
new life and light of our all too mortal flesh.

And while some might commemorate this Lenten season of “more light” by
throwing shade and giving up certain pleasures of the flesh,
I want to recommend quite the opposite: that we observe Lent
by throwing *light*, by casting *light*, by shedding *light* on the places
of darkness, that Isaiah notes: places of injustices; places of oppression;
places of hunger; places of homelessness; places of nakedness;
parched places; places of rubble.

“*Then*”, Isaiah says, “will our light break forth like the dawn,
and our healing quickly appear”.

“Then, will our righteousness go before us, and the glory of the Lord will be our rear guard.

Then, will the Lord answer when we call, and will say, ‘Here I am’, when we cry out in our all-too-mortal state.” (Isaiah 58: 8-9)

Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, God commands Israel to be a people committed to practical, down-to-earth exercises of compassion and justice, on behalf of the poor and needy, widows and orphans.

And Jesus spent his entire mortal life in just this way: throwing God-light on those who sit in darkness.

And he commends in his Sermon on the Mount, that we likewise cast light, shed light, throw light, be light to the world,

when we fast in unobvious way on behalf of the victims

of injustice, oppression, violence, neglect and displacement;

when we pray in private for the healing of our most fragile ones;

when we give alms in secret for the feeding, clothing, and housing,

of those most in need.

Then, our God will see what is done in secret, and will reward us,

Jesus says. (Matt. 6:4)

Mortality can be a treacherous subject, but I want to share one lovely local story
about casting light – God light, Jesus light, Lenten light,
and enhancing the gift of life in others.

This particular story comes to my mind at this time of year, as an example
that the saints of God can be of any age, and that love shared
is love multiplied.

Florence McDow, our own member, was six years old, hospitalized at Duke's
Children's Hospital in the winter of 2012, suffering extremely
from the auto-immune encephalitis, which would shortly take her life.

But on February 13, 2012, Florence wanted to make valentines for
the other children on her hall at the hospital.

So, her mother, Leslie, helped her make the heart-cards with the
flourishes of color, stamps, and stickers which children love,
and Leslie left them in her room when the guard changed,
and grandfather Clarkson came to spend the night with Florence.

As Clarkson relays in his beautiful telling of the evening, Florence woke up
at 3:50 a.m. and announced, "no more nap", and so they gownned up,
put on pants and shoes and went out to make their pre-dawn deliveries
so the other children would have their valentines when they woke up.

Clarkson helped push Mr. Pole, as in IV Pole, while guiding Florence with
the bag of valentines on their super stealth mission,
being very quiet so that no one would hear them.

To the far end of the hall and back they went, until the good deed was done,
and naptime resumed for Florence and Grandpa Clarkson.

As it turned out, this was the last time Florence would leave her bed.

Hers was such a sacrificial act of compassion; such a beautiful example of using
the ephemeral gift of one's own mortality,
to reach out to another human being struggling with theirs;
such a brilliant testament to Isaiah's vision of God's peaceable kingdom,
led by none other than a little child (Isaiah 11: 6).

Sometimes, throwing light on a person in darkness,
is throwing a life-line; is literally throwing *life* on a person in darkness.

So, that's what I want to commend to you as a Lenten practice in the way of Jesus,
the Light of the World; in the earth's darkest places, let there be light.

Let's focus our prayers, our fasting, our almsgiving on practical, down-to-earth
acts of compassion and justice on behalf of someone, anyone

who sits in the shadow of sickness, or imprisonment, or depression, or poverty,

and join our limited mortal life force to theirs.

Because, as Dr. Martin Luther King once said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness,

only light can do that.”

And when the light of God’s love is shared, the transfiguring and transforming

Christ-gift of resurrection power shines through our being mortal. Amen.

Benediction: You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world. Let your light shine before all people with the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fire of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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