

12 April 2015

Sister Death: Can We Just Talk about This?

Ecclesiastes 3:9-11, 18-21

Ecclesiastes 3:9-11. What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

Ecclesiastes 3:18-21. I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upwards and the spirit of animals goes downwards to the earth?

I read a book this year by an anthropologist named Ernest Becker, called *The Denial of Death*. Becker's thesis is that the core explanation of all human behavior is our fear of the reality of death. Where Sigmund Freud traced everything back to sex; Becker says it's mortality. The basic human conflict is this: we are able to imagine realities beyond this life, and yet we know this life is limited. We are vastly superior to other animals. They operate by means of instinct, but we transcend mere instinct. We are self-aware and can choose how we respond to the world, can even choose to act *against* instinct, as we do when we choose to protect the weak, give generously to strangers, or forgive those who harm us. The capacity act beyond instinct, with courage and compassion, represents the glory of humanity. We are somehow above mere creatureliness. In the words of Ecclesiastes 3:11, God has set eternity in our hearts. But there is a down side to self-awareness: we are also aware that for all our glory, all our potential, we will die and decay and smell bad for while then turn to dust, just like every creature. Or, as Ecclesiastes 3:19-20 puts it, *For the fate of humans and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same spirit, and humans have no advantage over the beasts; for all is pointless. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again.* Here, according to both Becker and the author of Ecclesiastes, is the central paradox of human existence: we are godlike in our potential, and after a few years we are mud.

Becker argues that this self-awareness is too much for us. We are not mentally or emotionally strong enough to face the irony and tragedy of our inevitable deaths, and so we live in denial. We build walls around reality and construct lies to tell ourselves how important our brief little lives are. If we're rich, we build monuments to ourselves – statues and pyramids and libraries with our names on them – anything to reassure ourselves that we will still matter after death. If we can't afford that stuff, we just screw our eyes tightly shut and make believe that death is something that happens to others, not to us. But here's the most interesting thing: Becker says this our denial is not all bad. We need it. Putting death out of our minds is the only way we are able to get up in the morning and function. If we didn't pretend, we'd go mad. Indeed, in a curious twist, he explains most mental illness this way: people with mental illness are those who can't make our usual lies work, who face the reality of death without the usual blinders. Now, I don't know how much of Becker's argument is sound; I'm not a psychologist or anthropologist. But I know two things. First, we do in fact live our lives denying the reality of death, and second, if we Christians really believe what we say we believe, we shouldn't have to.

We do avoid the thought of death, don't we? Last week someone asked me what I would be preaching on next, so I told her about this series. She said, "Ew, *that* sounds like a downer." Admit it: you thought the same thing when you first heard about it, didn't you? We don't *like* to talk about death, or even think about it. So we don't. Moreover our culture has made it possible for us to avoid it. Today we've moved death almost entirely out of sight. People don't die at home surrounded by family, as they used to. Most die in hospitals or nursing homes, from which they are taken directly to funeral homes, where the funeral directors do extraordinary artificial things to make them look "life-like." Death in popular books and movies is something that happens to bad people. A movie that takes death seriously may get a round of good reviews and an award nomination, but no one goes to see it, because, "Ew, *that's* a downer." Medical science, as wonderful as it is, also enables us to cling to our denial, giving us the false conviction that there is always one more thing we can do, that the next wonder drug will cure us, the next experimental treatment will hold off death a little longer. In fact, we don't just deny death, we deny *approaching* death: aging. Gray hair? Wrinkles? There's a dye for that, a surgery for that, a treatment for that. This new exercise will resolve your joint pain, this new diet will fix your digestion. We don't just pretend we'll live forever, we pretend we'll be *young* forever. Have a blue pill. When we *have* to talk about death, we avoid saying the word – she passed away, maybe, or just passed – but if we have our druthers we don't talk about it at all.

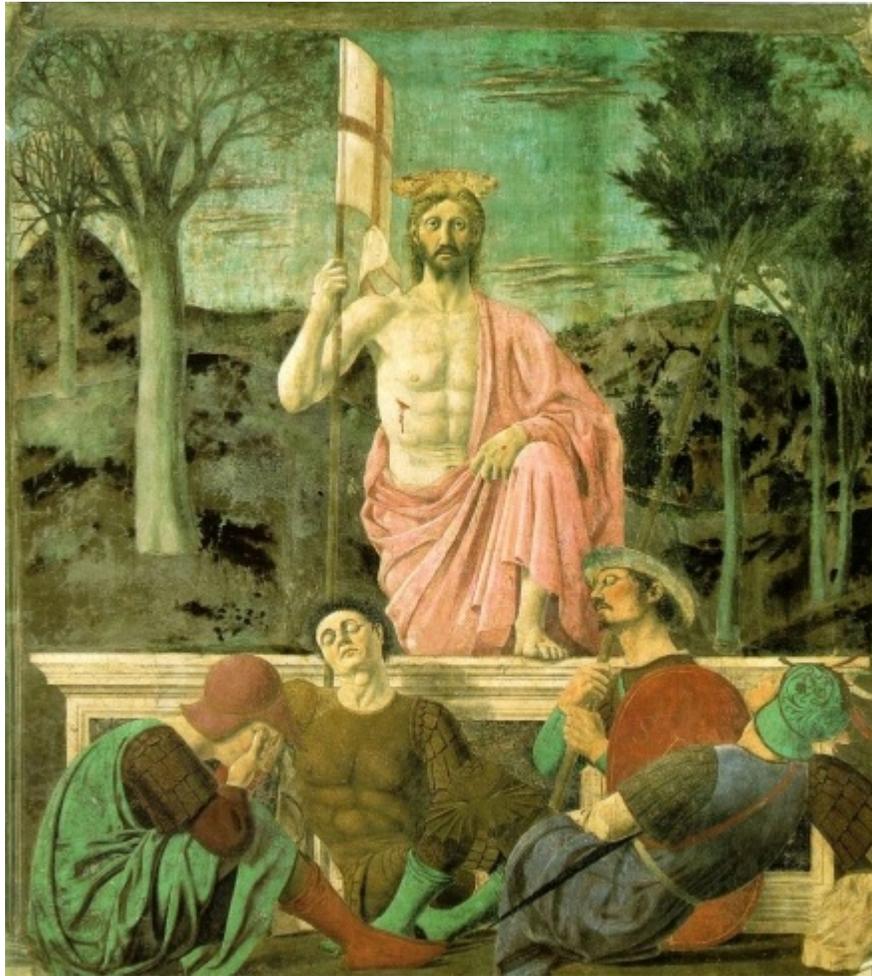
By the way, this explains why you have never in your life heard a sermon from this passage in Ecclesiastes 3. You didn't know that was in there, did you? Not surprisingly, Becker kind of likes Ecclesiastes; he calls it an "uncharacteristically honest book of scripture." But we preachers avoid it at all costs, because it simply faces death. The author says, "Go ahead, become the smartest person in the world; you'll still die. Become the wealthiest person in the world; you'll still die. Just like the cattle. Just like the bugs."

Right. So, to this point, maybe the sermon series is just a bit of a downer. But remember our first verse from Ecclesiastes 3: God has set eternity in our hearts. To that author, hundreds of years before Christ, that just felt like a cruel joke: that God enabled us to imagine life and meaning and purpose beyond death for a little while before we died. But we see things differently now. Jesus rose from the dead, and promised that we too will follow him, in the same way: not as ghosts, not as ectoplasm, not as a spark of life-force, but in new and glorious bodies, inhabiting a new and glorious earth. As I said last week, our faith teaches that death is not when life ends; death is when life is healed and renewed. Resurrection is not becoming completely different; resurrection is finally becoming ourselves – the real, physical, eternal, loving images of God that we were always meant to be. We have already begun the life that we will live eternally in the presence of God; death is simply a transition to the time when we will live that life more openly, more fearlessly, in the healing and searing presence of the Lord.

I will talk next week about what this could and should mean for the way we live our lives, but for today, perhaps it is enough to say, we do not have to live in denial. Death is real, a fact that really does make much of what we do in our brief lives here pretty pointless – "Wow, you scored an Apple Watch. How about that?" – but there is meaning and purpose and life that transcend death. Becker spends a whole chapter on the philosopher Kierkegaard, whom he describes as facing the reality of death with complete honesty. But wait! Didn't Becker say that we couldn't do that without going mad? How did Kierkegaard manage it? In Kierkegaard's own words, "Only faith is capable of such courage." He says, "it is not that faith annihilates fear, but faith remains ever young, and it is continually developing itself out of the death throes of fear." But we *must* confront death. When we do, he says, then we demolish all our inadequate goals, which allows us to face the possibility of greater meaning. But again, he says, possibility leads nowhere if it does not lead to faith: the faith that our very creatureliness, our physicality and mortality, has meaning to a Creator. Yes, we are mere creatures, creatures who can accomplish

nothing in this life, but we exist over against a living God for whom everything is possible. (See Becker pp. 90-91)

The title of this sermon series comes from St. Francis of Assisi, who in his great canticle of praise speaks of “Sister Death.” St. Francis, who referred to his own stubborn and reluctant physical body as “Brother Ass,” spoke of Death herself with just as much familiar affection. When we face death honestly, we discover deeper faith. And the deeper our faith, the less frightening death is. In the poem I’ve reproduced in your bulletin insert, Dylan Thomas tells us to “Rage, rage, against the dying of that light,” Well, that’s one option. But maybe a deeper wisdom is found in the journal of Etty Hillesum, who – while she was in Auschwitz – wrote, “By excluding death from our life we cannot live a full life, and by admitting death into our life we enlarge and enrich it.”



Final word: I love this painting, Piero della Francesca’s *Resurrection*. Jesus rises in all his glory, and everyone sleeps through it. You can almost see Christ rolling his eyes. We are Easter people. We serve a Risen Lord, for whom death was a speedbump and who waits to give us a hand over that barrier as well. But when we live our lives in fearful denial of death, we miss that strength. Christ is Risen; He is risen indeed.