

## BEING MORTAL

**Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11**  
**The Baptism of the Lord**  
**January 11, 2015**  
**All Saints', Atlanta, Georgia**

“And God separated the light from the darkness...God called the light Day, and the darkness Night. And there was evening and there was morning the first day.” In the very beginning of creation there was distinction and the passing of time. With distinction and the passing of time there is also necessarily finitude; and finitude entails mortality.

Scholars have long debated the exact meaning of Jesus' baptism by John in the river Jordan which Mark calls “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” But one thing is clear and that is that this baptism marks a beginning, --a new thing—and so also the end of an era. Christians adopted the practice of baptism marking just such newness of life for every person. We say that in baptism “we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.” Friends, this is about drowning, more than bathing; the sanctification of life, more than a doorway to moral rectitude; death, more than purity.

I know some of you have watched the Netflix series called “House of Cards”. You might remember a scene from the first season that has haunted me. One congressman is trying to get another to shape up and deal with his drug, alcohol and prostitution problem. He makes his embattled colleague

drink coffee and take aspirin and then makes him get in a hot bath. All seemingly very caring, very kind. Then he slams an old fashioned razor blade down on the edge of the tub, points out that the coffee, hot bath and aspirin functioning as a blood thinner will make things easy for him if he chooses to take the coward's way out. Talk about confronting mortality in a bathtub! It's not a direct analogy to baptism of course, but it has been a powerful reminder for me that what we mark in our own baptism is that very choice of life over death, the way of life over the way of death. The choice to know death overcome in us that leads us to baptism in the first place is one that we make again and again day by day, whenever we remember what really matters to us, when we engage the liberating practices of faith, and allow our care and concern to shape our choices. Whether we know it or not, every major choice is at some level bound up with the reality of our mortality.

This was brought home to me most powerfully in a recently published book by the popular writer and Boston doctor, Atul Gawande. It is called *Being Mortal* and subtitled *Medicine and What Matters at the End*. A truly extraordinary book that looks at lots of realities surrounding the end of life from how doctors can be more honest and helpful to how nursing care and assisted living can be more humane. What is pertinent for every one of us today however is his recognition that much end of life care boils down to the lowest strata of Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs. Those are what we need for physiological survival, --food and water and the like, -- and safety, --law and order and so on. The truth that Dr. Gawande points out is that "reality is more complex. People readily demonstrate a

willingness to sacrifice their safety and survival for the sake of something beyond themselves, such as family, country or justice. And this is regardless of age." Surely the editors of Charlie Hebdo were in that category in some sense, as were the thousands of Parisians who took to the streets with the terrorist brothers armed and at large. The matters at the top of Maslow's hierarchy of needs continue to matter more than safety, more than survival, and perhaps especially as our horizons begin to near. Attaining personal goals, the pursuit of ideals and relationships for their own sake, self-determination and the like all really do matter.

Gawande tells a number of stories of how the end of life can be managed toward personal goals other than simple avoidance of pain or physiological survival, but that requires a measure of clarity about what makes life worth living. One seventy four year old man was found to have a mass growing in the spinal cord of his neck. The neurosurgeon told him and his daughter that there was a 20% chance he would be left quadriplegic if he had the surgery and 100% chance if he did not. Eventually the daughter got the courage to ask her father what he really wanted. She had his medical power of attorney. She said: "I need to understand how much you're willing to go through to have a shot at being alive and what level of being alive is tolerable to you." She was shocked when he said that if he was able to eat chocolate ice cream and watch football on television he would be willing to go through a lot of pain and stay alive for that. Complications developed during the surgery. He was going to remain severely disabled for many months and possibly forever. The surgeons said they would need to go back in to save

his life. She had three minutes to decide. When they said he would be able to eat chocolate ice cream and watch football, she gave the OK to take him back to the operating room. Without the conversation with her father, her instinct was to let him go. But he had told her what he wanted. He lived another ten years with enormous pain but wrote two books and a host of scientific articles. When he could no longer swallow, she chose to stop medical treatment and engage hospice care.

In another story Dr. Gawande tells of getting a call from the husband of his daughter's piano teacher, saying that Peg was in the hospital. It turned out she had been misdiagnosed with arthritis when in fact she had a soft tissue cancer eating into her pelvis. He said that she endured a year in hell, surgery, chemotherapy, months of hospitalization. "She'd loved cycling, yoga, walking her Shetland sheepdog with her husband, playing music and teaching her beloved students. She'd had to let go of all that." Nonetheless she recovered enough to resume teaching on a limited basis until the cancer returned about 18 months later. She knew she was dying and didn't think hospice could do much for her. She was really in despair. Eventually Gawande and her husband persuaded her to try hospice whose goal was to get her and give her 'one good day'. At first that was mostly about managing her difficulties, and as that happened with fairly simple fixes like putting a bed downstairs and a portable pot by the bed, and Peg's anxiety declined. She got clear that in her remaining days she was going to stay at home and she was going to teach. She wanted to take leave of her friends and give parting advice to her students, one of whom was Gawande's daughter. Hospice helped manage her medications so that she

could, even with pain. That girl and a few others gave a concert in her living room, Chopin and Beethoven for the teacher they loved. She told each of them privately that they were special to her. Gawande says "Peg got to fulfill her dying role. She got to do so right up to three days before the end, when she fell into delirium and passed in and out of consciousness."

Stories have endings and our endings matter. Knowing what we want in the face of death is something we can certainly think about, but like Jack and Peg, might not know or be able to predict until the horizon is closer. Earlier in life our tasks, desires, purposes and meanings are usually different than they will be when our horizon is close by. But every day we are asked the question of our baptism: will you choose life? The alternative might not be the razor blade, but plenty of choices can be just as cowardly: numbing ourselves, fleeing from challenge, allowing others to be the authors of our stories.

In the very beginning of creation there was distinction and the passing of time. With distinction and the passing of time there is also necessarily finitude; and finitude entails mortality. Every day we are invited to live out the consequence of our baptism and discover anew what really matters to us in the face of our own mortality, --never more so that when death appears as our horizon. Jack and Pat chose life. And every time we make that same choice we might hear the love at the heart of the universe whispering: "You are my child. You are beloved. With you I am well pleased."

(In our customary time of silence, I invite you to ask that in the days to come, whatever you are doing, you may choose life and so live into your baptism day by day. In silence and in response to the Gospel, let us pray....)