

There's an App for That!

Genesis 17:1-7; 15-16

Mark 8:31-38

“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

There's an app for that! An app, if you are in my generation or above and do not know, is a little computer program that can be downloaded on your iPhone. Presently I am taken with an app two millennials created to remind you five times a day at random intervals that you are going to die. It is called WeCroak. I downloaded it. Sure enough, five times every day I hear a ping, I look at my phone and read a message that says, “Don't forget, you're doing to die.” It is my signal to go to the app and read a quote that was chosen to be either uplifting or grizzly. Mostly the quotes are banal. Still, I love the design. The saying cannot be saved nor can you click twice to read more about the author. You simply stare at stark white words on a black background that disappear, that die when the next ping sounds. Inspired by the Bhutanese folk saying “To be a truly happy person, one must contemplate death five times daily,” the 99-cent app had been downloaded 84 times, well, 85 times counting me, since its inception last July. Not quite a success story.

WeCroak is pinging me right now because I will do anything to grab your attention at the beginning of a Lenten sermon on death and dying. Though to tell you the truth, given what I do and the world in which we live, I do not need to be reminded five more times every day that I am going to die because I am reminded every time I walk in the church office and look at the white board, every time I say my prayers for each one I know who is ailing, every time I walk through the corridors of a hospital, every time I open the newspaper, turn on the television, check my newsfeed, listen to NPR, every time I have an inexplicable ache or pain living as I do on the other side of cancer, I remember that I am going to die.

Israel did not need reminding either. What reads like a founding story about God's promise to Abraham in his ninety-ninth year and Sarah in her ninetieth, before there was a people or a nation, that Abraham would become the father of a multitude of nations is, in fact, a story written well into the Babylonian exile or maybe as late as when the remnant had returned to the rubble of Jerusalem. Everything that God promises Abraham in the story they tell each other in the darkness is dead and gone. The land? Conquered. The king? Killed. The temple? Destroyed. Hope? No longer a thing with feathers perched in Israel's soul. All was limit rather than possibility.

So too for Jesus, whose brief mortal life was nearing its end, a fact that he shares with his death-denying disciples. Then Jesus turns to the crowd, his words in Mark addressed to an early church whose members were already facing death under Nero's reign. In that context, they surely heard Jesus saying to them, if you spend your one precious life avoiding death, you surely will forfeit the life given you by God to live; if you risk your life, if you give your life away for love's sake, you will die to death's power over you and live to God.

Like the Israelites and the disciples and the early church before us, we may not need an app to remind us *that* we are going to die. Rather we need someone to remind us, in this death-dealing world, what is worth our life. To that end, I am going to ping us with three quotes. Here is the first: “The unique opportunity... is simply human life in its limitation by birth and death... Unique means this one time exclusively, it means once and not twice; once and never again. The limitation which this implies is staggering.” Unlike WeCroak, I will go on to explain!

What is staggering about the limitation is the uniqueness. Once and not twice. Once and never again. At the end of a poem in which Mary Oliver tells us that she doesn't exactly know what a prayer is, but she does know “how to pay attention, how to fall down/into the grass, how to kneel in the grass/how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields/which is what [she has] been doing all day, tell me,” she asks at the end, “what else should I have done?/Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?/Tell me,” she insists, “what is it you plan to do/with your one wild and precious life?” With your once and not twice life. With your once and never again life.

The point is not just that you are going to die but it is that you have been given this particular life at this particular time and not another. Held in the purposes of God, even the life of a child that lives but a few days is unique and unrepeatable and staggering in that brief life's importance to the whole. Just ask a parent or a grandparent who will never again be the same because they have held in their arms between birth and death this precious, unrepeatable life. And if, by reason of strength, you are still upright after threescore years and ten, whether you know how to kneel in the grass and be idle and blessed or whether you intend to go out marching for justice and camping out on some congressman's doorstep, the question is a question asked daily by any who live remembering they are going to die: What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

We have been given this unique and brief opportunity by a God who baked beginnings and endings into creation. From the first, God called the light Day and the darkness he called night. And there was evening and there was morning, a first day. A beginning and an ending. If we are paying attention, it is as though we are born and we die every day in our waking and our sleeping. "There is nothing to be done about it, but ignore it, or see," says another poet. "And then you walk fearlessly, eating what you must, growing wherever you can, like the monk on the road who knows precisely how vulnerable he is, who takes no comfort among death-forgetting men, and who carries his vision of vastness and might around in his tunic like a live coal which neither burns nor warms him, but with which he will not part." The limitation which this implies is staggering.

A second ping: "Rather than tolerating our limitation with a sigh, we have every reason to take it seriously, to affirm it, to accept it, and to praise God for the fact that in it we are what we are and not something else...or [we may] peevishly dream that another and much more distinguished offer might have been made." That is to say, we can choose our attitude not only toward our final limit but toward those limits that come fast and furious in what we fancy to be the unassailable prime of our lives. Honest to God, WeCroak pinged me just as I was writing that sentence: "You may win your heart's desire, but in the end you're cheated of it by death." Peevish! Remember Salieri in Amadeus? "Grazie, Signore! You gave me the desire to serve You--which most do not have--then saw to it the service was shameful in the ears of the server. Grazie! You gave me the desire to praise You--which most do not feel--then made me mute. Grazie, tanti! You put into me perception of the Incomparable--which most never know!--then ensured that I would know myself forever mediocre. Why? What is my fault?" Peevish.

On the other hand, there is the NYT columnist Frank Bruni who is going blind. "They say," he writes in today's paper, "that death comes like a thief in the night. Lesser vandals have the same M.O. The affliction that stole my vision, or at least a big chunk of it, did so as I slept." Bruni went to bed seeing the world one way. And woke up seeing it another. "I went to bed believing I was more or less in control—that the unfinished business, unrealized dreams and other disappointments in my life were essentially failures of industry and imagination and could probably be redeemed with a fierce enough effort. I woke up to the realization of how ludicrous that was."

We may come to terms with the limitation or peevishly dream that a more distinguished offer might have been made. Bruni flailed on two fronts: "I tried to grow accustomed, day by disorienting day...and...I also fought not to be angry and afraid, a struggle familiar to anyone with a significant illness or disability." There are these intimations of death, each a crossroad where our diminished selves must ask with a wholly different inflection: *Now* what is it you plan to do with your one wild and limited and still precious life? "I'm bumping up against my limits," Bruni concludes for now. "The trick is figuring out when to focus on them and when to look away."

Which leads me to your final ping for the morning: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." Taking Jesus' words literally, I cannot help but think of the sheriff's deputy who remained outside Margery Stoneman Douglas High School for the first four minutes of the shooting rampage that took seventeen lives. Who among us does not know the fear of death that caused Scot Peterson to lose the life that is life, to lose the unique opportunity that was his that day? But we also know the God who remembers how we were made, remembers the dust, and remembers why we were made, remembers the love. Tell me, what is it that you plan to do with your one wild and precious life now? There's a Savior for that. Amen.