

Today's question is from a relatively new worshipper at Northminster, Sonny Liston, who is currently doing rehab for recent surgery. Sonny's question: Why did God create the world so that we have to die? Given that we make similar mistakes generation after generation, why couldn't we just live forever so we could figure all of this out and remember it?

**Stump the Pastor:**

**Show Us the Number of Our Days**

**Psalm 39:4-7**

**Luke 12:15b-21**

**Northminster Presbyterian Church**

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In the fantastic and puzzling world of Middle Earth, that realm created by J.R.R. Tolkien in which he sets *The Lord of the Rings* books and *The Hobbit* and a number of other smaller works, it is called the "Gift of Men." It is what gives the race of humans a sense of drive and purpose and urgency and passion. The "Gift of Men" is death, mortality.

Seems odd doesn't it? The elves, if they don't kill one another in violence or accidents, live forever. But humans are envied because they die. That's certainly not the take of the ultimate origin story, the Second Creation Narrative of Genesis, with the Garden and the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It appears that humans are created immortal and only fall into mortality because of a desire to be like God, to know good and evil. But we have to remember, that story didn't become a part of the Hebrews' way of viewing themselves until probably around the time of the exile, just eight centuries before Jesus was born. It was much more a story about how we came to have free will and moral agency in our own lives than it was about lamenting that we aren't immortal.

Still, the more orthodox among our biblical scholars and reformed theologians would answer Sonny's question with just one word: sin. We die because we sin. But to me that's too simplistic an answer and it doesn't really answer Sonny's question, because even if it's true that we are mortal because we sin, God could have designed things otherwise. So, where else might we turn for answers? Well, I'm a white, American male. So, of course, I'm going to suggest we take a look at something American.

It's 1813. John James Audubon's journal records this encounter with migrating birds: "I began to mark with my pencil, making a dot for every flock that passed. [But] the birds poured in in countless multitudes...163...flocks in twenty-one minutes... The air was literally filled...the light of noon-day was obscured as by an eclipse...the continued buzz of wings had a tendency to lull my senses to repose...with a noise like thunder, they rushed into a compact mass, pressing up each other towards the center...Before sunset I [had travelled] 55 miles...[they were] still passing in undiminished numbers and continued to do so for three days..."

That was 1813. What were the birds Audubon was describing? Passenger pigeons. Ornithological experts say there were around 5 billion passenger pigeons in the United States in 1813 when Audubon saw this migration — 25 to 40 percent of the total bird

population in the US. By 1913, 100 years later, there was one, named Martha, living at the Cincinnati zoo. And she died in 1914. We believed that there was an unlimited supply of passenger pigeons, and so we trapped or shot them for cheap food. We chopped down the forests where they mated and reproduced; we treated them like they were nothing special, something we would always have; and we wiped them off the face of the earth.

I sometimes think that may well be what life would be like if we were immortal, that we would take every day for granted, that we would assume that we had an unlimited number of days and so we could waste this one. And, with an unlimited number of days for every person, why do I need to care if you are having a bad day today? There's always tomorrow to help you out, right?

What if Tolkien was right? What if our mortality is actually a gift — we are made to live life with purpose and a bit of urgency, aware that tomorrow isn't promised to anyone? What if knowing that I have only the number of days I'm going to have and you have only the number of days you are going to have makes us see one another in a different light, a light that says — I cannot fully enjoy this day if I know you are prevented from enjoying this day because of something I have the power to change?

Jesus, in Luke, is concerned that people will look at the short window of time we enjoy in this life and become obsessed with winning. You know the kind of winning he was worried about? He who dies with the most toys wins, or the most power, or the most influence, or the most money. It's as though Jesus knows what Tolkien talked about — that mortality makes us live more urgently, even if we sometimes forget where that urgency should be directed.

Why didn't God make it so we could be earthly immortals? Perhaps because God wanted to give us free will, to give us the ability to make choices on our own. And God knew that if we had an unlimited number of days and free will, we would surrender to that same kind of careless living that wiped out the passenger pigeon; that we would use up our humanity because we took it for granted. It's true about many of the elves in Tolkien's world. They hold grudges for eons. They turn to war (one of the only ways they can die) because they take what they have for granted.

The most beautiful view in my apartment is from the middle window of all of those on the eastern wall of the apartment. It looks through beautiful trees and provides an amazing vista to see the sunrise, not all the way to the lake, but still open enough that the morning sun, dancing through the leaves in summer or the branches in winter, is truly a lovely way to greet the day. But that window, the window with the best view, is in the bathroom. And the only way to really enjoy that view is to stand in the shower. That view is special because it's only a tiny part of my day, a tiny part of my life. I would probably get bored with it after a while. It would just be another view. But I appreciate it more because it's brief; it's not always there.

I have a lot of concerns about the economic system of capitalism but it is based on a truth that is hard to deny. Scarcity gives something value. Life is abundant and filled with possibilities but life is also scarce in the sense that our time together in this life is finite. In the life of faith, we say we have life eternal after this life, after this time. Some say that

how we live this life — what we believe, whether we are among God’s elect — determines how we will spend the life beyond this one. I don’t know if that’s true, but we choose to follow Christ whose life, death and resurrection are signs and symbols that, for the very source of life itself, love and grace are stronger than death.

In the Hebrew tradition, they viewed it a bit differently. For some writers in that tradition, being remembered was a way of living on. So long as your words, your actions, your deeds, your love lives on, you live on. For them, too, love was stronger than death and being remembered in love was stronger than death. Cicero said, “The life given us, by nature is short; but the memory of a well-spent life is eternal.” The Dalai Lama said, not too long ago, “Share your knowledge. It is a way to achieve immortality.”

All of this got me thinking about the apparent motivation for Sonny’s question. We make so many mistakes that have been made before. Why can’t we live forever so that we will remember and not keep getting it wrong? But then I stop and think about the mistakes I made in my early youth, and the mistakes I made in early adulthood, and the mistakes I made last week. And, sadly, a few of them were similar. Oh, I’ve learned a lot, and I don’t make all of the same mistakes, but just growing older doesn’t mean I don’t make some of the same mistakes. I make fewer, I hope, and I do learn from them. To be honest, I don’t think living forever would keep me from making some mistakes over and over again. But being mortal, knowing that I don’t have forever to figure something out, actually does make me curious about what others have done before.

We literally don’t have to reinvent the wheel because someone else already did and left behind their learnings about it. First there was, let’s call him Og, who just rolled things on top of polished stones. And then his daughter, Ogginna, who figured out a rock with a hole in it meant you could put in an axle and get stability. And on and on and on until someone figured out self-parking cars for heaven’s sake.

What if the very fact that we’re mortal drives us to preserve our knowledge and our learnings, so the next generation can learn from our mistakes? Oh, sure, they aren’t going to get it right all of the time and when it comes to war, we haven’t yet figured out that the only way to win is not to play the game. But there is hope we can make progress and, yes, there will be setbacks. And, yes, there will be those who reject the idea of learning from the past, or those that long for the past instead of wanting to build upon it. And what if, knowing that the longest-lived person in history only got to see less than 45,000 sunrises makes us appreciate the one we got to see this morning all the more? And knowing that the people around us might not be there tomorrow shouldn’t make us fear death but rather make us cherish the moments we have with them right now, and not want to waste one moment in pettiness or silly arguments. What if our culture’s obsession with hiding the reality of aging and death is actually preventing us from its greatest gift — the urgency of not wasting a single moment with hate or bitterness when there is so much to love, to learn, to appreciate? I think the Psalmist is right ultimately: Let us know how fleeting are our days; let us know we are mortal in this life anyway so that we can cherish, not hoard, our days, our knowledge, our love, and even our joy.

The talented and puzzling contemporary composer, William Finn, wrote a song series a while back called *Elegies*. It was shortly after 9/11 and he wanted to write about people he

loved who had died, but not in a maudlin way. So he wrote almost 20 songs, including one in the voice of his beloved high school English teacher, who died of cancer, who sings about living on in her student's love for words and literature. And he wrote two songs about his best friend growing up, who died a young mother. One is in her voice—a song of how she will be with her daughter through all of life's joys and sorrows. And the other song is his own reflection on how she lives on in him. He writes:

*I see the world through your eyes  
What's black and white is colorized  
The knowledge you most dearly prized  
I'm eager to employ  
You said that life has infinite joy*

*Your heart  
Your glee  
Haunt me  
Your words strike suddenly  
They're obvious, but wise*

*I see the world through your eyes  
And possibilities expand  
The one thing I don't understand is  
How you kept your poise  
You said that life has infinite joys.*

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Yes, we are mortal, thanks be to God.  
Yes, our hope for life after this one rests in God.  
And yes, despite not living forever here, and not being certain what is next, and, indeed, maybe because of those things, this life, the gift of a joyful God, nevertheless can have infinite joys.