**Naming Our Fears: Aging and Death**

**Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen**

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*Scripture: Psalm 90; Romans 8:35-39*

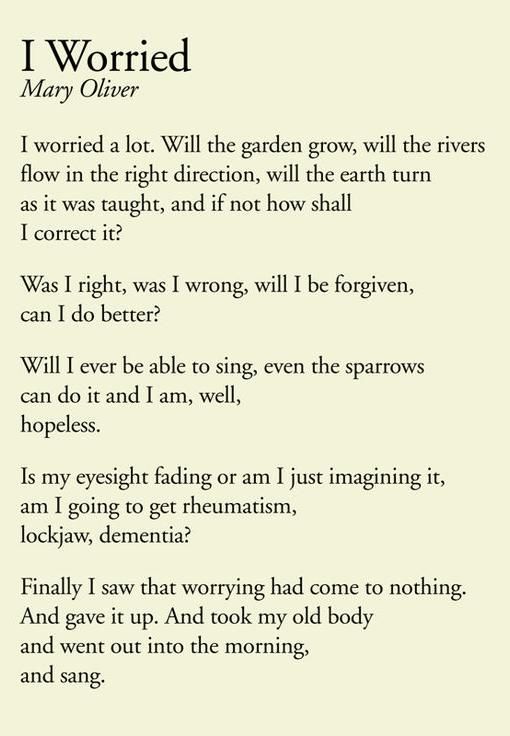
*Song: Don’t Be Afraid (Sing the Journey 105)*

As I was reading and preparing for this sermon, I picked up a book that I’ve mentioned to some of you already. It’s called *Everything Happens for a Reason: and Other Lies I’ve Loved* by a woman named Kate Bowler. She is about my age, is a professor at Duke Divinity School. She is married to her highschool sweetheart, and has a young son. In many ways, she was living her ideal life. Then she was diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer. This is the experience she writes about in this book, which is by turns tragic and funny and heartbreaking. Reflecting on her diagnosis, she writes, “One moment I was a regular person with regular problems. And the next, I was someone with cancer. Before my mind could apprehend it, it was there – swelling to take up every space my imagination could touch. A new and unwanted reality. There was a before, and now there was an after. Time slowed to a pulse. *Am I breathing?* I wondered. *Do I want to?* Every day I prayed the same prayer: *God, save me. Save me. Save me. Oh, God, remember my baby boy. Remember my son and my husband before you return me to ashes. Before they walk this earth alone.* I plead with a God of Maybe, who may or may not let me collect more years. It is a God I love, and a God that breaks my heart.”[[1]](#footnote-1) What makes Bowler’s reflections even more poignant are her reflections on the prosperity gospel, which is her research specialty. This is the theology that if we are only faithful enough, then God will bless us with health and wealth and happiness. Throughout this time of facing her terminal illness, Bowler feels like the absolute antithesis of this theology – her experience simply doesn’t match that belief in a God who has a reason for every kind of suffering we might endure as human beings.

Interestingly for our topic this morning – our fear of aging and death – Bowler reflects on aging as someone who will never grow old, someone who has been denied the privilege of a long life. In her irreverent, tongue-in-cheek way, she writes, “*Lord, save me from old people.* It will become a constant refrain with my older friends that the moment one of them starts to complain about an aching hip, all the rest will slowly turn and look for my response. And I will not disappoint them. “I’m sooooooorry,’ I sympathize, my voice thick with sarcasm. ‘Is your looooong life becoming an encumbrance?’”[[2]](#footnote-2)

What makes her book so powerful is that she talks honestly and openly about things we as a culture tend to look away from and sweep under the rug: fear of aging, with its accompanying losses of independence and abilities, and relatedly, fear of death. On the whole, our culture doesn’t handle these very well. A couple of weeks ago, Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg held a panel discussion on death, and the four speakers – everyone from a hospital chaplain to a casket maker! – talked about how our culture worships youth and thinks about aging and death as some kind of failure rather than a natural part of life. There is a long history of Western attempts to find the “elixir of life” or “fountain of youth” – a goal which reflects “an unwillingness to acknowledge mortality as a necessary creaturely passage.” These days, there are new attempts to use technology to beat death in one way or another, from experiments with holograms to cryogenic freezing to injecting old mice with the blood of young mice, which apparently makes them behave as if they were younger. This goes beyond medical advancements which create a better quality of life for us as we age to actual attempts to overcome death and live forever – at least, for those who can afford it![[3]](#footnote-3) As a culture, there is also a distancing of younger and middle-aged folks from the elderly and the dying – elders are segregated from the rest of society, and the dying are handed over to specialists so that the rest of us don’t have to be reminded too much of death, which will eventually come to us all. One panelist, Angelika Jantz, talked about how she had not used a funeral home when her mother died, but the family kept the body at home (with proper precautions). There, they were able to clean and dress her themselves, and spend time with their mother’s body before the funeral and burial. She talked about how that process helped them not have to let go of their mother so suddenly, and feel that they were able to care for her very tenderly after her death, as people used to do here and still do in many cultures around the world.[[4]](#footnote-4) But many of us would find it difficult to spend time with our loved ones in this way after their deaths, to look death in the face in this direct way.

The Bible is certainly not as reticent as we are in our context to talk about human frailty and death. Psalm 90 is one of those passages that looks death squarely in the eye, contrasting it with God’s eternity. Using Ash Wednesday or funeral language, it speaks about the passing of the generations, and how God “turn[s] us back to dust, and say[s], ‘Turn back, you mortals.’” It continues, “You sweep them away, they are like a dream; like grass that is renewed in the morning; in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers” (Ps. 90:3, 5). The psalmist is under no illusions here that human life is limited, and comes to an end – in fact, the psalmist seems to lament the brevity of human life, with the metaphor of grass that sprouts and grows in the morning, but has already dried up and died by the evening. In a frankly hopeless tone, it continues, “For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh. The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away” (Ps. 90:9-10). This is downright glum, and reflects a belief that human life is futile, or too short to be meaningful. But after recognizing our brief life spans and the inevitable passing of the generations, the psalmist then turns to thoughts of comfort and gladness. Here is verse 14: “Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us as glad as many days as you have afflicted us, as many years as we have seen evil. Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands – O prosper the work of our hands!” (v. 14-17). Here we do see some hope after all – hope that God will send gladness in the morning – that is, during the time when the grass is growing and green. In other words, even though are lives are short, even though we are, all of us, mortal human beings, send us gladness, O God, while we are alive, so that we may rejoice during what time we have on this earth. May the days and years we have be ones of gladness and joy. And may the children in our lives – the next generation – also know God’s glorious power. The psalm ends with a prayer for God to “prosper the work of our hands!” which to me, speaks of wanting to do something meaningful with one’s life, for one’s efforts to make a difference in the world through the grace of God.

It reminded me of a poem by Mary Oliver, who died this past year:

As in the Psalm, here Oliver speaks of worrying about things she has no control over – the natural world, one’s own worthiness, the aging process. And she decides to give up worrying, to surrender to enjoying what time she has on this earth. So she “took [her] old body and went out into the morning, and sang.” In another beautiful poem, she asks, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Interestingly, this is where Bowler ends up, too. If we think about having limited time, all we can do is try to use it wisely and well, to love as much as we can while we have time. In her words, “I have tried to scrounge around in my life for things to improve, sins to repent of, things to give God to say, *There. I gave it all*. But it is something else entirely to surrender my family.” When she catches her husband watching her as she watches their toddler son sleep, all she can do, she says, is “try to communicate, *I know. I know. The water is rising and the levees may break and it will sweep us all away. But until then, I am here. I will not let go.”* Later in the book, she regains her sense of humour. She buys “a huge sign that reads YOU ARE MY BUCKET LIST” and puts it up in their living room as a bold reminder that love is the most important thing.*[[6]](#footnote-6)*

The apostle Paul certainly knew that, as well. In a way, his letters to the early churches that we have preserved in the New Testament were a version of “YOU ARE MY BUCKET LIST.” He ended up giving his life for them. But even with the prospect of his death before him within a context hostile to the fledgling Christian church, he writes profound words of comfort and courage to the church in Rome about a God who is Love and whose love is always, always with us:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.’

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Did you catch that? Nothing – not even violence, or suffering, or death itself – can separate us from the love of God. That is the very heart of our faith that we are leading up to remembering at Easter – that love is stronger, even, than death. That we are held by God even beyond death, so that we are never alone or outside of God’s care. That is where we place our trust, as Christians. But I know, that doesn’t necessarily make the difficulties of aging or our fear of death any less daunting.

Jarem Sawatsky is another wise writer dealing with a terminal disease and facing death squarely. In his book, *Dancing with Elephants: Mindfulness Training for Those Living with Dementia, Chronic Illness, or an Aging Brain*, he tells his own story of having to “retire” at age 41 from teaching peace studies at Canadian Mennonite University because of Huntington’s disease, which runs in his family. He describes Huntington’s as “a combination of Parkinson’s, Alzheimer’s, and Schizophrenia,” and writes, “I understand the agony, pain, and struggle of having your world turned upside down by disease and aging. I have watched Huntington’s move through three generations. I look into the eyes of my [teenaged] daughters with the full knowledge that there’s a 50/50 chance that they too have Huntington’s, passed on by me. After they turn 18, they will need to wrestle with whether or not to get the DNA test done. It is possible this disease may take another generation, my girls.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Given this painful reality, Sawatsky goes on to explore mindfulness exercises and prayers that can help him not be fearful about the path that lies ahead of him – especially knowing that his daughters are watching him deal with an excruciating disease they may one day inherit as well.

He explains this as “dancing with elephants,” which means “wrestling, laughing, and stumbling my way into healing. Not the kind of healing that takes away the disease but the kind of healing that awakens the heart to love. … dancing is a playful way of engaging that which we fear most. … Suffering is real and must be faced head-on. But suffering alone is not enough. On the other side of suffering can be joy – and also more suffering. We must learn to dance with both.” One of the exercises he suggests is called the “corpse prayer,” which begins with picturing yourself in the last three minutes of your life. “Where will you be?,” he asks. “What will you be doing? . . . Imagine the scene as if you are watching it on a TV screen. Notice the emotions that arise within you as you watch. Do not identify yourself with these emotions, but recognize that they are rising within you. If these emotions are primarily fear and anxiety, then you know this is a tender topic that needs your careful attention. Let us practice loving yourself at the point of your death.” And as we picture this, he invites us to pray these words:

*“Be not afraid. I give thanks to God who created all things good. In Christ, all things hold together. I am not entitled to life without death. I embrace sacred life. I embrace sacred death. I embrace the growing and crumbling in between.”[[8]](#footnote-8)* He

invites us to continue picturing the moments of our burial, of our decay, of being reduced to bones and then to dust. And with each step, he invites us to pray the prayer that embraces death as sacred and a natural part of life. He talks about this practice as freeing. “If in the end all is dust, then now is the time to enjoy, to play, to love,” Sawatsky reasons.[[9]](#footnote-9)

What a powerful example of turning suffering and death into something life-giving. Think of the gift he is giving his daughters in showing them essentially how to die well, through this and other mindfulness practices throughout the book. Whether or not they have to endure Huntington’s disease, their father has shown them a way to deal graciously with human frailty and mortality – a lesson we can all learn from.

So how does this speak to us as a church family? I’m sure we can think of examples from our lives of people who have dealt graciously with suffering, aging, and death. Some of us are those people trying to age graciously and die well, before our peers and younger people watching us and journeying alongside of us. As I mentioned in the children’s story, that is one of the very best gifts of a church community: this mixing of the generations, as the elderly and the babies are the presence of God to each other and everyone in between. It’s like when the days-old baby Jesus was presented in the Temple, and Simeon and Anna, the wise elders, rejoiced and blessed him, even as he blessed them with his newborn presence (Luke 2). So those of us who are aging now can be examples to the rest of us.

But we can also help each other not have to go through these kinds of experiences alone – that is also our calling as the church. Kate Bowler writes that when she had just received her diagnosis and learned she was going to die, she felt surrounded by the love of her community. “At a time when I should have felt abandoned by God, I was not reduced to ashes. I felt like I was floating, floating on the love and prayers of all those who hummed around me like worker bees, bringing notes and flowers and warm socks and quilts embroidered with words of encouragement. They came in like priests and mirrored back to me the face of Jesus.” In this way, the worst moment of her life didn’t leave her feeling angry, but loved.[[10]](#footnote-10) That is also a profound gift.

May we also serve one another in this way, we who are the hands and feet of Christ in this world. May we remind each other that love overflows this life, taking us beyond our own fearful finitude, allowing us to rejoice in the morning and rest in God’s care when it is our time. AMEN

1. Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved* (Random House, 2018), xiv-xv. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bowler, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See John Jay Alvaro, “Ashes in a Digital Age,” in *The Other Journal* (March 6, 2019), https://theotherjournal.com/2019/03/06/ashes-in-a-digital-age/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. To watch the discussion “Let’s Talk about Death” at CMU, visit: http://www.cmu.ca/face2face/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mary Oliver, “The Summer Day,” https://andreas.com/poems.html [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bowler, 70-71, 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jarem Sawatsky, *Dancing with Elephants: Mindfulness Training for Those Living with Dementia, Chronic Illness, or an Aging Brain* (Winnipeg: Red Canoe Press, 2017), 13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Sawatsky, 28-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Sawatsky 30-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Bowler, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)