

“Why do we die?”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
March 5, 2017

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

If you were to wander into the Creation Museum in Kentucky, where Jenna and I used to live, you'd notice something odd: there are dinosaurs hanging out with Adam and Eve! That's because the Creation Museum believes the Book of Genesis provides a literal account of creation. Which means God must have created dinosaurs on the same day God created other land animals, including people. But before you get too worried that Adam and Eve are about to become dinosaur lunch, remember that Genesis also says that in Eden all animals were vegetarians.

That lovely verse takes on a whole new meaning when you see a ferocious dinosaur eating a pineapple. I, of course, am opposed to this theory if for no other reason than that it completely ruins the movie *Jurassic Park*.

Silly or not, consider this: in just eight years, 2.4 million people have visited the Creation Museum. People want to know how the world came to be the way it is.

It may be one of the hardest questions we can ask: Why is there death, and why does God allow it? For those who believe in a loving and gracious God, death—especially painful and premature death—is a problem.

On one side of the debate, you have those who say that death is in the world because the world is broken. Death isn't part of God's plan; it is the enemy, and must be fought. It is a sign of our alienation from God. I hear the words of poet Dylan Thomas, writing to his dying father: “Do not go gentle into that good night, Old age should burn and rave at close of day; Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

In the other corner, you have those who believe death is a natural part of the existence God has designed for us. Death is merely a transition from this earthly life to our eternal life with God. It is not to be feared or fought; it's to be accepted. I hear the words of poet Emily Dickinson: “Because I could not stop for Death – He kindly stopped for me – The Carriage held but just Ourselves – And Immortality.”

But, I ask you, what if both are true?

I have seen an old man, lying in a hospital, let go of life, finding in death a release from pain and, he hoped, a reunion with loved ones long lost. I can see how such a death is a gift for some. However, I have also seen a young child writhe in pain and die. And I cannot believe that such a death is God's will.

So we return to the Bible, in search of a truth more sublime, understanding the creation story isn't history; it's poetry.

Here's what Genesis tells us about God's intentions. God intends life. God gets down into the dirt and intimately breathes life into humankind, inviting them to eat from the Tree of Life. God intends freedom. God tells them to eat freely of almost every tree and blesses humanity with free will. God intends pleasure. God creates trees bearing delicious fruit that delight the senses. God intends purpose. God instructs Adam to care for the garden God has created. And God intends boundaries. God asks one limit to humanity's freedom and pleasure—that they not eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. We're not supposed to have everything.

This boundary might include a natural death, or it may be that God never intended humankind to die. I don't know. But if death was part of God's creation, then it is a boundary that drives us to appreciate life, to make the best use of our time, to accept that we are not self-sufficient but need one another and need God. It forces us to recognize our own vulnerability, out of which comes compassion and community and service.

If life is fellowship with God, then death—as God intended it—is too. Far from a lonely experience, such a death would take place surrounded by family and friends and all of creation, confident in the presence of God. We might not know what to expect, but that's OK, because we trust that this death is a passageway to peace and to God.

But, of course, we know that death isn't always like that. It can be ugly, and terrifying, and unfair, and painful. Often death is when we feel most abandoned by God, our trust violated. Death then becomes, not only a physical shutting down of the body, but a spiritual separation.

The Genesis story, however, isn't really about death; it's about the fear that attaches itself to death. Fear of having to rely on God, of there being something in the world beyond our knowledge and control. Thus enters the serpent, who twists the mystery of death into something to fear and master. The serpent pushes humanity, not just toward knowledge, but toward power, and independence, and a life without boundaries.

Suddenly, when they eat this fruit, the word *we* disappears from their vocabulary. "It is all 'I'," writes Walter Brueggemann. "I heard... I was afraid... I was naked... I hid... I ate... I ate."

God's gift of vulnerability and interdependence is suddenly seen as something to fear and be ashamed of.

Fearfulness will lead to separation, which will lead to violence and the very first murder, when Cain kills his brother Abel. A new kind of death will seep into existence.

And it is this death that Paul talks about. For Paul, sin and death are real powers that have seized control over human life. In seeking power, we ceded it. The dominion of death is a lonely, cutthroat, predatory existence. Community becomes competition. Abundance becomes scarcity. Trust becomes a quest for power.

Thus, we, like Adam and Eve, are hidden behind the dominion of our terror.

The good news is that God comes looking for us. God enters the garden and searches for Adam and Eve. And when God discovers their disobedience, God doesn't punish them with immediate death, as threatened. God puts clothes on their bodies and sends them out to live—this time, with even more boundaries, which will hopefully humble humankind and force them to work together. And when God sees that death still has dominion, God comes again, looking for us, walking among as Christ, determined to wrestle death and overthrow it, that we might know the free gift of the dominion of life—God's kingdom.

What was separated in fear, Christ mends in love. Christ conquers death, not by power, but by the cross, that ultimate display of vulnerability.

In Christ, I hear another poem of Dylan Thomas: “And death shall have no dominion. Dead men naked they shall be one With the man in the wind and the west moon; They shall have stars at elbow and foot; Though they go mad they shall be sane, Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again; Though lovers be lost love shall not; And death shall have no dominion.”

I don't ultimately know why we die—whether it's because we need a boundary that pushes us together and toward God, or it's born of the violent desire to be separate and powerful—but I do believe that, because of Christ, we are freed to face death, knowing that life, and grace, and God are more powerful.

On Ash Wednesday, I shared with you a selection from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's writings who was imprisoned for trying to overthrow Hitler and help Jews escape Nazi oppression. Bonhoeffer is a man who stared into the face of the dominion of death, then known as the Final Solution, an attempt by the Third Reich to exterminate all Jews from existence. Bonhoeffer was hanged, alongside six other resistance fighters, on April 9, 1945, just one month before Germany surrendered.

A camp doctor who saw Bonhoeffer hanged has recorded for us Bonhoeffer's last moments on earth: “The prisoners... were taken from their cells, and the verdicts of the court martial read out to them. Through the half-open door in one room of the huts, I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this unusually lovable man prayed, so devout and certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps of the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost 50 years that I have worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.”

I see Bonhoeffer. I see what he lived for. I see what he died for. And I see what waited for him beyond the gallows. And again I hear the words of Dylan Thomas: “And death shall have no dominion.” **Amen.**