

Everything ends. We may know this intellectually, but quite understandably, we are reluctant to explore this idea, let alone fully accept it. For most people today, the first place their mind goes when they hear, “everything ends,” is their own lives, or perhaps the lives of their closest loved ones. And often that thought is so uncomfortable that we immediately distract ourselves.

Sometimes people try to criticize Christianity and other religions that teach a good afterlife on the grounds that since we don’t typically welcome death, that means we don’t really believe in heaven. I know better than to try to speak on behalf of other religions, but I know that criticism doesn’t hold up for anyone well-formed in the Christian faith, because Christians understand death as a corruption of creation, and the very central teaching of Christianity is the defeat of death by our Lord Jesus Christ. In a supreme irony, he used death to make eternal life in heaven available to all.

But there I go changing the subject. We can’t evade death indefinitely, but we can live our lives as well and fully as possible, and we can minimize the traumas that accompany the end of life by making thoughtful plans in advance. I’ve been impressed to see that in the funerals we’ve had here since I became your rector, a lot of the planning was already done. I’ve heard some comments about the most recent one, Bill May’s funeral, some saying they wanted something just like that for themselves, and others saying they wanted something very different, and in both cases, I’m glad to know that people are thinking ahead.

If you have not already put your end-of-life wishes into writing, not just funeral plans but also making a will, setting out your wishes for care, and naming people to make decisions on your behalf, please do. And if that feels overwhelming or you want help, please talk to me. I’d be glad to help in any way I can. You’ll be doing your loved ones a great service, I assure you.

While we tend to think in terms of our own lifetimes, Jesus shows us a bigger picture in today’s Gospel. This story comes from his final days in Jerusalem, where he knew his own life would be cut short, and he chose to accept that in order to accomplish his greater mission of redeeming humanity and the whole of Creation. So he points out that not only do lives end, but so too do those things that come to mind when we think of what outlasts an individual life. Monuments, cultures, even mighty kingdoms end.

His disciples’ remark about the Temple as they were leaving it prompted Jesus to put that great edifice in perspective, first rhetorically, then literally. I don’t blame the disciples for voicing their amazement. Herod undertook the rebuilding and expansion of the Temple Mount complex, an ambitious project even for a ruler whose building projects were notoriously impressive. Even today, Herod’s largest building projects are still tourist attractions. The Temple Mount project was so vast that work continued in Jesus’s day, decades after Herod’s death.

The large stones of the Herodian platform of the Temple Mount, including the famous Western Wall, are impressive just in themselves, even for modern people. The

largest single stone is almost 12 feet high and 41 feet long. With an estimated weight of over 600 tons, it's one of the largest objects ever moved by man. Yet next to God's stones, the mountains of the Earth, it's a grain of sand. But that's not the reason Jesus does not share his disciples' enthusiasm. Jesus knew that Herod's building projects represented not greatness but a tyrant's insecurity and a population's crippling taxation.

Jesus elaborated on his teaching in what I imagine was a Sorkinesque walk-and-talk, leading the disciples down from the Temple Mount to the east, across the Kidron Valley, and up onto the Mount of Olives, which has a picture-postcard view of Jerusalem. He needed to give them perspective. The Temple Mount is still the most prominent feature in that view, but not only would they be looking down on it, they would have seen it in its context of a small city surrounded by a vast rolling landscape.

But Jesus used that position to articulate a perspective in time, rather than space. He talks about signs that would show the watchful that the times are about to change. I don't even like it when shops put out Christmas decorations before Thanksgiving, but some of the things Jesus describes are downright terrifying — yet Jesus's message is fundamentally one of hope and encouragement: "Do not be alarmed."

Our lectionary cuts Jesus's words short, which kind of makes sense because he goes on to say some even scarier things, but all that is to set up his main point, which is: God *will* send a savior to deliver the faithful from all the troubles of the world, and everything *will* be OK in the end for those who stay faithful to God. So while Jesus is honest about what his followers will be up against, and what God expects from us, his message is ultimately uplifting.

We need to hear this because we tend to put too much faith in the wrong things, things that impress us, things we can see. Yet even mountains don't last forever. As the Prophet Isaiah wrote, "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low," and that is literally already happening. The change is especially dramatic on the west side of the Temple Mount. If you go there today, you see that the valley separating it from Mount Zion has completely filled in.

The valley to the east, closer to the disciples' vantage point, the Kidron Valley, is a striking place. It was a burial site in Jesus's day, and it remains so today: both sides are densely lined with tombs. That valley had long symbolized the gap between life and death, between this world and the next, or between this age and the next. There's no way that symbolism was lost on Jesus. Perhaps he also wanted to plant in his disciples' minds a hint at the great truth: that even death, the seeming final word, the seemingly immovable obstacle, will end.

While we cannot ourselves avoid death, neither can we interfere with Christ's triumph over death. Only Jesus can save us, so we are right to celebrate his arrival in every form. That's why we soon will say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord," because we know Jesus is about to arrive among us under the forms of bread and wine.

While we cannot control time, we can make our time sacred with faithful worship and good works. Strengthened in matter and in spirit, we can heed Jesus's call to watchfulness and rededication to God.

We can stand up to secular messages telling us we don't have time to practice our faith, that we can't make a difference and must accept the status quo — what if someone got offended? We can stand up to seemingly-unmovable tyrants like Herod and Caesar. We can remember God's big picture and refuse to be impressed by human attempts at self-glorification. We can stand up to death itself and insist that it will not, cannot define us. We can live such Godly lives that when we arrive, others recognize us as coming in the name of the Lord, and celebrate us, too, as blessed.

Everything ends except for God, and the love of God that unites us to God's eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.