“Mortals Living Eagerly” March 8, 2020

Every few years, Canadians collectively raise our eyebrows and notice that something quite out of the ordinary is happening, and . . . it might not be good. Do you remember, for example, the Y2K scare? The stock market crash of 2008 and 2009? Or SARS?

When the Y2K scare happened, Irene and I, as well as our friends Nick and Nandy and our kids, loaded a large picnic cooler with mementoes of our lives—tapes and a tape player, articles we had written for journals, pictures, newspapers, awards and even a coin collection—we loaded it all into the cooler, wrapped the cooler up in multiple layers of plastic, and on New Year’s Eve, before a roaring bonfire, we buried it, at midnight. We left maps for our grandkids to find it back and open it in the year 2050. It was a way to thumb our noses at Y2K.

And yet, given our raised eyebrows, we also socked away several jugs of water and a few weeks’ worth of canned food, rice and beans at home. You can’t be too careful.

When the stock market crash happened, in 2008, we again did as all the experts suggested. Nothing, this time. We didn’t panic. We didn’t buy gold or sell our stock portfolio. You can’t be too careful.

And now we are all collectively raising our eyebrows again, this time on account of the COVID-19 virus. We don’t know how serious this epidemic will be, compared to, say, the 2003 SARS outbreak. It spreads more easily but fortunately the COVID-19 virus is less dangerous than SARS, if you catch it. The vast majority of people who catch COVID-19 will be fine.

Still, we are now washing our hands more often and bumping elbows and wondering about whether or not we should travel. Irene and I have cancelled a vacation to Baja, Mexico. We were supposed to fly out March 18. But you can’t be too careful. We’ll have a staycation, instead. Our dog, Jex, with thank us.

Still, if we’re honest, our eyebrows are raised and it is all a bit unsettling. What can I say? I’m not a doctor. The washing hands guidelines, such as they are, are simple and posted everywhere. As a minister I urge you to be religious about following them!

The elephant in the room here, of course, the thing we’ve all thought about more than a few times, even if only briefly, is death. I read a nice little story about death this week. It goes like this:

Once some tourists from Canada were visiting Poland. They had heard about the famous Polish rabbi Hafez Hayyim and managed to receive an invitation to visit him in his home.

When the tourists arrived, they were surprised to see that the rabbi’s home was only one simple room filled with books. His only furniture was a table and a bench.

“Rabbi, where is your furniture?” they asked.

“Where is yours?” replied the rabbi.

“But we are only visitors here,” answered the tourists.

“So am I,” said the rabbi.

When it comes to life, we are all tourists. That is why I have made a point about preaching sermons about death, several times, in the past. But today, especially since our eyebrows are raised because of COVID-19, I’m going to talk about it again. Our mortality should not be an elephant in this room. After, I am going to say something about life, too.

Now, LPCC members hold to a variety of views about what happens when we die. That makes speaking about death here complicated, if not less important. But, for example, some of you have beautiful traditional beliefs. That is, you hope that when you die you will go to heaven. This Sunday’s scripture is full of that sort of hope. “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us,” says Paul. “We wait for the redemption of our bodies,” he adds, in case we were not sure what he was talking about.

But others of us are much, much less certain about all that life-after-death stuff, or maybe don’t even believe in God at all, as post-theists. These members of Lawrence Park Community Church take what Paul says about life after death with a large grain of salt. They are with the Psalmist who says, “In death there is no remembrance of Yahweh; in Sheol, [the afterlife], who can give you praise?” These members believe that death is simply the end of the road. And there are many, many positions in between.

What do I think? Two things. First, I am okay with the uncertainty. Whatever the ultimate truth about death is, I like the title of Julian Barnes’ beautiful book, *nothing to be frightened of.*

I also know that many Christians, and for that matter, many Hindus and Buddhists and Muslims and Pagans have come up with 101 detailed explanations for what happens when we die. In Christianity, for example, we talk of intermediate states, and resurrection and judgments, of New Earths coming down out of heaven and meeting Jesus in the sky. Who knows? Maybe one group of Christians or Pagans or Hindus actually got the post-life map exactly right.

But what is more interesting and alluring to me than the details different religions differ on is the near universal sense that most humans have always had that there is more to this life than just this life. That seems important to me—and mildly hopeful.

So, when people ask me what do I think of life after death, I answer, “I hope so. When I die, I hope that I will awake to a grand adventure. I really like that idea. But, if not, when I die, I will get my best night’s sleep ever.”

But the second important thing to say, more important than “I’m not sure,” is that *following Jesus is for the living, and not the dead*. Remember that story I told you a few minutes ago, about being tourists? The rabbi’s name was Hafez Hayyim, which means, “responsible caretaker of life.” And that is exactly what Jesus—and many other prophets—call us to. To live, really live now—responsibly. To cherish and nurture life, wherever we find it.

Here, I offer just two pieces of advice, though really, nearly every Sunday you come to church you’ll hear some further take on what responsibly living life is all about. But, because of our raised eyebrows, and the goodness of living responsibly, just two things today, one very practical and kind; and the other one inspirational.

Practically speaking, make sure your affairs are always in order enough so that in case you do die, those who survive you know what to do next. As a minister I have too often seen family grief compounded when the persons who died refused to plan for that eventuality. Most importantly, have a will and an advanced care plan or directive. Married or not, make sure that your bank accounts and credit cards and mortgages and insurance are all in order. Leave a file behind, where it can be easily located, with your will and on your computer—a file entitled, “In case of death.” Fill that file with the practical information people will need to tie up your affairs in a gracious manner that does credit to you.

I know that this all sounds a bit weird to hear from a pulpit primarily dedicated to spiritual matters. But you might not hear this sort of encouragement anywhere else if you don’t hear it here. And, after all, doing these things are spiritual, because doing them is kind and loving.

But there is one more inspirational piece of advice I have for those of us, who as Bruce Cockburn once sang, live in dangerous times—though again, I don’t want to exaggerate how dangerous, or put people more on edge than they need to be.

It is this. No matter what your age or risk category, though perhaps especially if you are elderly, remember: now is always the right time to do wonderful and beautiful things with your life. We are called to be responsible stewards of our lives; but not merely responsible. If we are tourists, it is because we wish to take delight in the journey and with our companions. So, now is the right time to do wonderful and beautiful things with your life! Now is the time to say that you are sorry. To give a gift to someone who is beloved or to make a donation to a cause that matters to you. Now is always the time to embrace a child or grandchild or an elderly parent and to be truly present to them, even if it takes time and energy. The apostle John writes, “My children, our love should not be just words and talk; it must be true love, which shows itself in action.”

It isn’t too late. The time for love is always now, whether in sun or shadow. The time for love is always right, no matter what the flu season does or does not bring.