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by Mary M. McGlone

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March 17, 2018

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Fifth Sunday of Lent

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Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalms 51

Hebrews 5:7-9

John 12:20-33

What do you think about death? About your death? It is a subject that we often try to avoid — a reaction that only strengthens its ability to disturb us. Have you noticed that while lots of TV shows depict death — be it in gun battles, car crashes, murder, mayhem, war or "justifiable homicide," entertainment rarely depicts a funeral? Death is the occasion for meting out justice, for detective skills and autopsies, but not for focusing on the deceased's respectful burial or the grief of the bereaved.

Only our newscasts seem to pay attention to the gaping hole left in the universe when someone dies — even then, it is almost always because of their murder, suicide or fame. Even more rarely do we get a glimpse of what someone thinks about their proximate death. Sometimes, patients in hospice will share their feelings. More often, people gather round them to express their love and support and to let them know that while they will be missed, they can move on. Death forces us to confront the deepest truths of our lives: what we have lived for and what we think it means.

On Nov. 27, 2013, Pope Francis reflected on death during his general audience in Rome. He said, "Death affects us all, and it questions us in a profound way. ... If it is understood as the end of everything, death ... terrifies us, it becomes a threat that shatters every dream, every promise, it severs every relationship."

He suggested that if we "consider our lives as a span of time between two poles: birth and death," such a vision of death is both reasonable and terrible. This vision, said Francis, is the logical conclusion of the atheism that "interprets life as a random existence in the world ... a journey toward nothingness," or the "practical atheism,

which consists in living for one's own interests alone."

He added that "when we think of death as the end of everything," we "have no choice but to hide it, deny it or trivialize it so that it doesn't scare us."

What sadder commentary could there be on someone's life than to trivialize their death?

Today's Gospel presents Jesus in the moment when he realized that "his hour" had come. Here, John gives us a glimpse of Jesus' heart as he makes the astounding statement, "I am troubled now." The word Jesus used for being troubled was the one that described him when he shared Martha's grief at Lazarus' death, the same word that depicted the churning of the waters of the pool of Siloam. Jesus was deeply shaken.



(Mark Bartholomew)

Having admitted that, his next words reiterated the core orientation of his life. He was facing his end, what would both look and feel like utter defeat, and his first thought was of his Father: Should he ask his Father for an escape? Reframing everything about to take place, he prayed, "Father, glorify your name." After expressing the depth of his human frailty, Jesus took on the role of explaining the things of God. "When I am lifted up ... I will draw everyone to myself."

John tells us that his phrase "when I am lifted up" indicated how he would die. Like so much John wrote, this has two levels of meaning. Jesus was speaking literally about being raised on the cross. But as John tells the Passion story, Jesus approached the cross as his exaltation, the revelation of the glory of God in him. In John's Gospel, Jesus' death on the cross is the revelation par excellence of God's unfailing love. The cross raised Jesus up as the icon of God's everlasting love.

In October 2017, Francis again spoke about death and said, "We are all small and helpless before the mystery of death." We can be encouraged by the fact that even Jesus quailed when he realized his hour had come. As the Letter to the Hebrews says, our high priest knows our weakness and he too prayed with supplication, cries and tears. Nevertheless, he led the way for us in saying, "For this purpose I came to this hour."

When Jesus chose to walk into what he knew was his final hour, he did so fully aware of the cost and his purpose: "Now is the time of judgment ... now the ruler of this world will be driven out." Only by going through his death would Jesus demonstrate that God's love overcomes every evil. That was the purpose of his life and his glory.

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Now and again, we all need to confront the fact that we will die; knowing that leads us to evaluate our purpose and the worth of each day. Blessed are we when we believe what Francis said of the moment of our death: "There hope will end and it will be a reality, the reality of life."

[Mary M. McGlone, a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet, is writing the history of the St. Joseph sisters in the U.S.]

Editor's note: This Sunday scripture commentary appears in full in NCR's sister publication Celebration, a worship and homiletic resource. Request a sample issue

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