

A time to reflect on death

By TIMOTHY O'TOOLE

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Holy Week is a time of extremes. From the jubilation of the crowd on Palm Sunday, to the somber, bittersweet mood of the Last Supper. The horror of the crucifixion on Good Friday, then the disbelief and ecstasy of the resurrection. Christ's first followers experienced emotional whiplash.

Our Holy Week liturgy mirrors that history. It is also a time of the year when Christians focus, however briefly, on our own mortality.

Death is not a popular topic, but it is an intrinsic part of our humanity -- a humanity we share fully with our redeemer. There are many kinds of death. Deaths of rejection, marginalization and despair. Deaths of heroism and self-sacrifice. Deaths of aggression or intoxication, homicide or suicide. Miscarriage or crib death, heart attack or stroke, cancer, motor vehicle accident. Innocent children, aging grandparents, heroes and victims, rich and poor all share the same ultimate mortality.

Waiting in my dentist's office, I perused a recent National Geographic. It included a fascinating chart from the National Safety Council depicting our odds of dying by different causes.

Each of us has a 1 in 1 chance of dying (a comforting thought, and perhaps our only escape from the alternative minimum tax). In descending order, death could be due to heart disease, cancer, stroke, motor vehicle accident, suicide, fall, firearms and so on. We are more likely to be legally executed than struck by lightning. The chance of being hit by lightning during an execution is virtually nil. Death by drowning is more common than death by motorcycle accident, but we are more likely to be hit by a car in the parking lot on the way to the beach.

We try to deny the inevitability of our own deaths, and ignore the deaths of distant strangers, be it in Darfur, Bangladesh or Baghdad. Death in quantity is a statistic. But obituaries in the local newspaper tell compelling stories -- of hard lives, full lives, broken lives.

Veterans of foreign wars who went on to become patriarchs (or matriarchs) of large families. Priests and ministers, doctors and nurses who devoted long years of service to others. Politicians and authors, plumbers and teachers, homemakers and pharmacists. Hero cops and inept crooks. Drug addicts and drunken drivers. Captains of industry and refugees from distant shores. Black or white, rich or poor, of humble or wealthy beginnings. Sad tales of lives cut short by crime or disease, and happy tales of long lives and firm faith in the hereafter.

Ah yes, the hereafter. What we are all here after. Jesus had to undergo a painful death to show us the way to eternal life. He knew when he was going to die. We don't have that "luxury." We have no clue as to how painful our own deaths will be, and whether death will constitute a disruption in our productive pursuits, or a merciful release from pain and disappointment.

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What we do believe is that Jesus made a promise to us that war, pestilence and global warming cannot erase. There is more to life than meets the eye, and more to death than the oblivion of Sheol. Our creator went to a lot of trouble to populate the universe with intelligent life. (In our case "intelligent" may be overly optimistic.) When we die, our bodies are good for spare parts, but our souls are bound for an indefinable, eternal reality.

Yes, Jesus was troubled with human doubt in his final moments on the cross. The rejection of his own people was more painful than the nails and thorns and heat and thirst. Pilate was surprised to learn that Jesus died as quickly as he did. No sense prolonging mortal existence when it's time for that final journey into everlasting life.

When it's your time to go, will you face your final moments with gratitude to our creator for the gift of life and expectation of the eternity to come?

Timothy O'Toole, the webmaster for First Presbyterian Church of Albany, writes about religion and government accountability, both with a humorous twist.