

▶ Outline

▼ Welcome

- My name is Dave Ainsworth. If you're new to Citizens, I'm one of the pastors.
- With the start of COVID-19, we began a new sermon series called "As We Wait: Faithfulness in Uncertainty"
- ▼ The first two weeks were aimed at our present experience.
 - All of our lives have been radically disrupted.
 - ▶ Our plans for the next few months (at least) have been derailed.
 - Not much is clear about the future.
 - But what is clear is that the Lord has willed for us to be under quarantine for the next month or two.
- ▼ Our first two weeks of this series focused on this experience,
 - How do we understand God's purposes for us?
 - How do we understand the wilderness we're experiencing right now?
 - What is God doing in me?
 - This week, though, I want to divert our attention from our present experience and speak to something larger going on, because it's only going to get more and more relevant to us as the weeks go on.
- ▼ I want to talk about death.
 - ▼ If the experts are to be believed, America is about to lose at a minimum 100,000 people to the coronavirus pandemic.

- That's if we do everything right and everything goes our way.
- The casualties could actually be much, much higher than that.
- This, of course, does not include the global numbers, which have already exceeded 100,000.

▼ **How do we think about such an event?**

- 50,000 people. 100,000 people. 200,000 people.
- Whose lives are over, all at once, unexpectedly.

- **How do we cope with it?**

▼ **How do we talk about it, as Christians?**

- People who believe in a God who is sovereign, all-powerful, all-good.
- A God who listens to prayers. Who is near the brokenhearted. Who rules the world with righteousness.
- A God who sent his Son to defeat death.

▼ **A few weeks ago, it hit me that I could be pastoring through a plague.**

▼ **The church has done it before, many many times, but I never thought I would be called to do it.**

- That's old stuff.
- I've thought about pastoring through earthquakes and war and religious persecution.
- But not a pandemic.
- There were no seminary classes on pastoral care during global pandemics.
- Since then, I've just been so sobered, thinking specifically about the loss of life that's ahead: that I could endure in my family. Thinking about the loss that our church could endure, and the loss in our city, country, and world.
- It was pretty easy for me to preach on finding God's purpose when plans are derailed, during seasons of suffering, because I've

experienced that and can comfort you with the comfort that I've received from the Lord.

- But it was not so easy this week to think about preaching when more than 100,000 Americans die in the span of six months.
- ▶ What will I say to myself? What will I say to you?
What will I say to my neighbors and my city?
- ▼ Am I ready? Are you ready?
 - I don't know if I am.
 - ▼ But as I've spent time with these thoughts before the Lord this month, I have been encouraged.
 - ▼ I'm not ready, but the Bible is ready. 100%
 - It has withstood pandemics before. It will withstand this one.
 - ▼ Christians saints throughout history, they're ready.
 - They have answers for us, comfort for us, prophetic words for us.
 - The Gospel is ready. It is about death. That's what the gospel is about. That's why Jesus came, to face death.
 - Christ is ready. God the Father. God the Son. God the Holy Spirit.
 - God is ready.
- ▼ And so this morning, I'd like to ask God's help to begin making us ready.
 - To just get us started. There's no crash course in this. We won't answer all the questions this morning.
 - But would he begin to prepare us
 - to speak truth to our own hearts.
 - to speak truth to each other.
 - and to speak truth boldly to our city.

▼ This is a perfect week to start this preparation, too, because it's Holy Week.

- The most important week of the year for Christians.
- And also a week that is all about death.
- The problem of death, the pain of death, the shame of death, the grief of death, the fear of death as Jesus trembles in prayer, pleading with his Father to take this cup from him, the reason for death, and ultimately the end death in the resurrection.

▼ Death is central to the Christian story.

- Of all times, this should be when Christianity speaks.
- When we identify with those who are suffering, when we grieve and rage like Jesus grieves and rages at the tomb of Lazarus.
- But more than identify with those who are suffering, we point to the one place where suffering can be relieved.
- To Jesus Christ who died, was buried, and rose on the third day, never to die again.
- This is our message.
- This is our hope.
- When medicine fails, when government fails, when the economy fails, when society fails, when we fail: Christ stands ready to save.
- Before we can speak comfort to others, Christ has to speak comfort to us.

▼ Prayer

- I'm going to open with prayer by reading 1 Peter 3:15

“But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you;” (1 Peter 3:15 ESV)

- Pray: that we would be comforted and that, from that comfort, we would be ready to comfort others.

▼ Memento Mori

- ▼ As Christians, we have inherited a long tradition of meditating on death.
 - So much so that it has a name.
 - ▼ *Memento Mori* is Latin for “Remember death.”
 - Hundreds of books and tracts have been written on how to die well, from the early church Fathers which focused on martyrdom through medieval times and into the Puritan era.
 - *Memento Mori* even impacted art.
 - I don’t know if you’ve ever been confused by skulls and skeletons in medieval paintings.

- This is *memento mori* in practice.



- You maybe wealthy enough to have your portrait painted, but don't forget that even wealthy people die.
- Think also of the child's bedtime prayer.

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep;

If I should die before I wake,
I pray that Lord my soul to take.

▼ **We think of this as morbid, but that's because our society has pushed death so far out of view.**

- Partially because of the success of medicine, but also because of changes to our culture.
- Many young people have never been to a funeral. If you have, you haven't been to that many.
- Most of us have never had to house a dying person in our homes; we care for them in hospitals or nursing homes.
- That's a very recent development in human history.
- If this were a Sunday in 1800, you and I would walk through a cemetery every Sunday to get to church.
- We might even have a cemetery plot at our house.
- It was impossible for people in earlier times to forget about death because death was all around them.

▼ **The point of *memento mori*, remembering death, is to prepare ourselves for such a time as this.**

- Honestly, I experienced some regret as a pastor this week for never teaching on death so plainly before.

▼ **This is the kind of sermon I want to deliver in person.**

- This is the kind of conversation I would never have on the phone.
- I would never choose a video call to talk about something so heavy.
- But here we are.

▼ **And I realized how I have neglected talking about death in my pastoring.**

- My preaching has tended toward human flourishing and quality of life, not selfishly but in a short-sighted way.
- It makes sense.

- I've only been a pastor at young church plants and where death has come up rarely.
- When it does, it's an exception, a statistical surprise.
- Frankly: I, too, have been duped by our culture.
- And, so here I am, having to play catchup personally and pastorally on a Zoom call when I should have already prepared you.
- I'm sorry. I earnestly wish I had preached this earlier and more frequently than today.
- But that's how God is using this event in my life and in our church and in our culture.
- Last week, C.J. talked about the shelter-in-place order as a forced wilderness experience, exposing our hearts, revealing to us the idols we are putting our trust in.
- In the same way, the pandemic is like a forced *memento mori*, the painted skull in the corner of our typically bourgeois life.
- The skull has always been there, but now we are just noticing it.

▼ Reflection Questions

- Has death come up for you more in the last few weeks? Why or why not?
- What comforts you in those moments? What continues to nag you?

- What do you need from God now in order to bring comfort to others? Where will you get what you need?

▼ Four Truths

- ▼ We can't possibly download everything the Bible says about death at once.
 - Today, I'm not going to talk about what comes after death: about heaven and hell.
 - I'm also not going to talk about grief, our response to death, which could be an important topic for a future week.
- ▼ Instead, I want to briefly offer four hard truths about death from the Bible, finishing with the good news of how Christ in the gospel experiences death with us and for us.
 - Death is inevitable
 - Death is tragic
 - Death is scary
 - Death is judgment

▼ Death is inevitable

- **The Bible tells us repeatedly to number our days.**

“The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.” (Psalm 90:10 ESV)

“So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.” (Psalm 90:12 ESV)

- ▼ **the Bible teaches us to live today like you're going to die tomorrow.**

“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is

no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.” (Ecclesiastes 9:10 ESV)

- Let your certain death prioritize your life.
- **David Brooks describes this as “learning to invest our lives in eulogy virtues, not resume virtues.”**
- **And, as Christians, we would add not just eulogy virtues, as if our life can only be captured in memory.**
- **We live in light of a coming judgment, when God Himself will capture our life.**

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.” (2 Corinthians 5:10 ESV)

““Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.” (Matthew 6:19–20 ESV)

▼ **Again, this is hard to bring up now.**

▶ *Memento mori* is ideally practiced before a pandemic, so that you’re ready for it ahead of time.

▶ That said, some people you know will be wrestling with this, in light of the pandemic.

- And, whether they’re Christian or not, it’s a biblical reflection.
- We should join them.
- **The Bible teaches that death is inevitable.**
- **And, ironically, life is more blessed, more fruitful, more joyful even, when it’s lived in light of our death.**

▼ **Second, death is awful.**

- **Just because death is inevitable doesn’t mean that we should accept it, resign ourselves to it, shrug our shoulders, or even reinterpret it as good or normal.**

- ▶ **Death-acceptance is just as unbiblical as death-avoidance.**
- **The Bible doesn't accept death. It grieves it.**
- **In fact, the Bible's entire story is about God's constant work to permanently eradicate death.**
- ▶ **Because he hates death and we should, too.**
- ▶ **God is not glorified by dead people.**

“For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who will give you praise?” (Psalm 6:5 ESV)

The Lord does “not wish that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9 ESV)

▼ **Christians should be deeply saddened by human death.**

- ▶ Tim Keller wrote recently,

Death is the Great Interruption, tearing loved ones away from us, or us from them. Death is the Great Schism, ripping apart the material and immaterial parts of our being and sundering a whole person, who was never meant to be disembodied, even for a moment. Death is the Great Insult, because it reminds us, as Shakespeare said, that we are worm food. Death is hideous and frightening and cruel and unusual. It is not the way life is supposed to be, and our grief in the face of death acknowledges that. (“On Death” by Tim Keller)

▼ **Not only should we be sad about death, we should be angry about it.**

- **Famously, Jesus wept at Lazarus' grave. There's another emotional word in that passage. Jesus wept and he also raged.**
- **He hated death and so should we. Paul calls death our enemy.**

▼ **Death is insidious.**

- ▶ **Think about this little virus, such a tiny thing, infecting the entire world silently.**
- **Is that not wicked?**

- Think of all the other terrors inflicted on people besides sickness: mental illness, financial loss, abuse, relational strain.
- I tell my kids regularly that they can't hate people, but they can hate Satan.
- They can hate death, too.
- Because death is awful.

▼ Death is also scary.

▼ We hate it, but like living under a harsh dictator, we can't do anything about it.

- We're powerless in the face of it.
- No matter how hard we try, and humans try really hard to avoid death.
- But death is too strong an enemy for us.

▼ Again and again in Scripture, death is presented as a villain.

- An intruder.
- A thief.
- A beast.
- ▶ A murderer closing in.

"My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen upon me." (Psalm 55:4 ESV)

"The cords of death encompassed me; the torrents of destruction assailed me; the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me." (Psalm 18:4–5 ESV)

- **People are frightened by this pandemic, and they should be, because death is scary.**
- **Our world is so much more advanced than we were in 1918, but we have again been brought to our knees.**
- **It's hard to fathom the power of death.**

▼ Last, death is judgment.

- The first three truths from Scripture, non-Christians can typically traffic with.
- ▼ The main Christian conviction around death, though, is that death is God's just punishment for sin.
 - It's not that every death is tied to a particular sin.
 - Neither is it that the pandemic as a whole can be blamed on one culture's sin.
- Rather, the Bible teaches us that death in general is caused by sin.

“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned” (Romans 5:12 ESV)

- Death is the consequence of sin, and not just a natural consequence, but the earned consequence from God.

“For the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23 ESV)

▼ Why is death the consequence for sin?

- Could there not have been a lighter sentence?
- Well, God is, by definition, holy and just.
- It is *categorically impossible* for him to hand out a punishment which does not fit the crime.

▼ So, what is the crime? What is sin?

- Sin, at the root, is the desire and intention to be like God.
- And death, more than anything else, proves once-and-for-all that we are not like God.

▼ We are dust, and to dust we shall return.

- There's a great book by Matt McCullough called “Remember Death.” It's short and powerful. Highly recommended.
- And he wrote how death offends our identity and self-importance because it says to us, “No one is too important to die.”
- God has made us important, but not important like he's important.

- He is necessary. I am not.
 - Sin is believing that I am necessary, that I am the center of attention, that I am in charge.
- ▼ We were created not to be gods, but to image God, to reflect his glory like the moon reflects the sun.
- In pride, we wanted to have our own glory. To have life in ourselves.
 - But without the sun, the moon is just a dead rock.
 - And without God, we are nothing.
 - In death, God says, alright. I'll take away my light from you and we'll see what happens.

- That's the judgment of death.
- It is the direct consequence of humanity's turn away from God, who is the only source of life and order.
- Without him, everything falls apart.
- It would fall apart instantly, but God is graciously staying death, even now, holding it back, in hopes that we would turn back to him.

[The Lord] is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. (2 Peter 3:8 ESV)

- But he will not hold death back forever.

“Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.” (Galatians 6:7 ESV)

- And sin reaps death. It is what humanity has invited on itself.
- As hard as that truth is, this is part of the Christian witness to death.

▼ Even in times of tragedy.

- This is not where I expected this sermon to go.
- It's not where I wanted it to go, really.

- ▼ **As I was writing this earlier, it was hard for me to believe that now is the best time to bring up God’s judgment for sin?**
 - I wanted to talk about death being inevitable.
 - I wanted to talk about how death is sad and scary.
 - I didn’t really want to talk about death as judgment.
- **Surely this is not a good time for this.**
- ▼ **But then I remembered Jesus’ words in Luke 13. Some people were pointing out some Galileans who were murdered by the government, and Jesus says to them,**

““Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”” (Luke 13:2–5 ESV)

- It’s important to note that this was spoken not to the mourners, but to those who were believing they were better than those who died.
- It’s unlikely we should lead with this word from Jesus. There are other places to start.
- ▼ **But, notice how differently Jesus responds to tragedy than we do.**
 - He doesn’t apologize for God’s sovereignty. He doesn’t defend God’s justice.
 - So often we interpret tragedy as evidence against God’s fairness and even his existence, but Jesus here interprets tragedy as evidence of God’s patience all the other times.
 - It should’ve been you. It should’ve been me.

“Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?” (Romans 2:3–4 ESV)

- God is patient, but not forever patient.
- ▼ This is what the Bible teaches about death.
 - Death is not inherent to life on earth, which is good news.
 - Death is not the way it's supposed to be, which is good news.
 - We do not ignore death. We do not accept death.
 - Death is the sad and terrible and scary result of God's just judgment against sin, and this is not good news.
- ▼ In fact, it's very bad news, but it's the only bad news we can be saved from.
 - Consider this question:
 - ▼ What if death was not the result of God's judgment but caused by something else? Why is every alternative explanation for death worse news than death as God's punishment?
 - Because you can't be redeemed from any of the other explanations.
 - If death is caused by karma, you can't negotiate with karma.
 - If death is caused by decay, you can't get protect yourself from decay.
 - If death is caused by Satan operating outside God's sovereignty, then God is not God and cannot save.
 - But if God is in control, and death is his just judgment, then maybe he will change his mind.
 - If death is the result of our broken relationship with God, a God who is not only holy, but whose holiness include his love, then there's hope for us.
 - ▼ It's a tough pill to swallow.
 - The hard truth of death being deserved is more painful than the alternatives.
 - It's more humbling and ego-bruising to me. I don't like it.

- But, if I know what's good for me, I should probably suck it up and plead for mercy.
- **Right before this hard passage in Luke 13, Jesus tells a parable describing our predicament.**

“And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison. I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny.” (Luke 12:54–59 ESV)

- **Jesus is saying to us, repent while you can. Plead for mercy before you stand at the judgment.**
- **Paul says in 2 Cor. 6:1, “Now is the favorable time; now is the day of salvation!”**

▼ Reflection Questions

- The Bible holds together these four truths. (Inevitable, Tragic, Scary, Judgment)
- ▶ Which of these have you wrestled with recently and which have you heard others wrestle with?
- Is judgment a harder truth to say and hear now than other times, or is it just always hard?
- We live in a fiercely judgmental age. Why can't we let God be judgmental?

▼ Christ and the Four Truths

- ▼ As we've said, this is a hard truth. But God does not leave us alone in it.
 - **Sin is our fault.**

- Brokenness is our fault.
 - Death is our fault.
 - But God in his mercy and grace takes our responsibility for death on himself.
 - He makes a covenant with his people, becoming one with them so that all his good becomes their gain and all their debt becomes his to pay.
 - And his good vastly overwhelms our debt.
- ▼ In the gospel, Jesus becomes one with us and he becomes one for us.
- ▼ First, in the Incarnation, the Son of God becomes one with us, including our struggle with death.
- ▼ Like us, Jesus was born to die.
- Death was inevitable for him.
 - He knew weakness and frailty and sickness.
 - He had fevers and stomach flus and aches.
 - Jesus knows what it's like to plan your days around death and the effects of death.
- ▼ Like us, Jesus was saddened by death.
- Jesus wept for Lazarus.
 - He knows what it's like to grieve over the loss of loved ones.
 - His Dad died when he was young.
 - John the Baptist, the man he most admired, the first one to really understand him, was decapitated.
 - Jesus knows grief.
- ▼ Like us, Jesus was scared of death.
- In the Garden, he knew fear.
- ▼ Like us, Jesus knows God's wrath.
- He didn't deserve it, but he took it on himself.

- And in so doing, he un-did death for us.
- ▼ **This is probably a prime way to share the gospel during this time.**
 - When people are wrestling and hurting, we can point to Jesus as a Sympathetic High Priest, a God who knows what death feels like.
 - But he didn't just come to identify with us, he came to take our place.
- ▼ **Jesus did not just come to be one with us, he came to die for us, in our place.**
 - He paid our debt so that we could be reconciled to God, released from Satan our Accuser, and freed from death's hold.
 - And, as a result, we relate to death altogether differently now.
 - Because Jesus died in our place, we don't have to be scared of death. He rose from the grave and so will we.
 - Because Jesus died in our place, we don't have to despair of death anymore. To die is gain.
 - Because Jesus died in our place, death (though inevitable) is not the end of us. The suffering of this world cannot be compared to the glory that will be revealed in us.

▼ Conclusion

- This is good news, good news for our world.
- ▼ I want to close where I began, with 1 Peter 3:15

“but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,” (1 Peter 3:15 ESV)

- **May we all be ready to speak, to give a reason for the hope within us, with gentleness and respect.**
- **May he give us the faith to honor Christ the Lord as holy in our hearts.**

- **To trust his sovereignty, to trust his justice, and to trust his grace.**