Sunday, November 16, 2003
WHEN YOUR TIME IS UP
Mark 13:1-8

Eddie was a grizzled war veteran who felt trapped in a meaningless life of fixing rides at a seaside amusement park. Just as the park had changed over the years from its simple rides to more complicated ones, Eddie had also changed — from being an optimistic youth to an embittered old man. His days had become a dull routine of work, loneliness, and regret.

Then on his 83rd birthday, Eddie died in a tragic accident while trying to save a little girl from a falling cart. As he took his final breath, he felt two small hands in his and then nothing. In the story, he regains consciousness in the afterlife, where you meet five people who explain your earthly life. Some of these people were loved ones, others distant strangers. Yet, each of them changed your life forever, though you didn't know it at the time. In the afterlife, Eddie gets a chance to look back and discover that his life on earth made more sense than he realized while he was living it.

This is the plot of the best-selling novel The Five People You Meet in Heaven by Mitch Albom, whose previous book, Tuesdays with Morrie, is still a best-seller. Eddie didn't know when his time would be up on this earth. He never thought about it much.

Like Eddie, you and I do not know when our time will be up. The fact that your life will end can be threatening when your life is filled with opportunities, good friends, and a hopeful future. On the other hand, if your life is filled with pain and suffering and little to look forward to, the fact that your life will end can be comforting.

If you are an older person like Eddie, perhaps you think more about the end of your life than he did. Maybe you prepare for it and put things in order. If you are not ill and you're busy in the middle of life, or if you are quite young, you tend to think less about it. But no matter your age, your time will be up, and you do not know for sure when that will be or how it will happen.

If you've ever thought about when your time might be up, you've probably asked yourself these questions or at least considered them: If you knew you had only one month to live, would you finish up important matters at work? Would you travel to a place you always wanted to go if your health allowed? Would you pray more, go to church more, or do that generous act you always wanted to do for others? Would you find a way to leave a mark on the world? Would you try to reconcile a broken relationship?

If you've asked yourself these questions, you've implied that you would try to make your last days in this life better than the life you're living now. You're saying that in the intensity of your last days, you would be more generous, more focused on the important things in life. Now comes the key question: Why do you need to be under the threat of death to do what you believe should be done or to do the things you've always wanted to do?

Of course, it's possible that if you knew you had only one month to live, you wouldn't change anything — you'd keep right on doing what you're doing now: going to work, paying your bills, and spending too much time at the office or factory. There's a kind of impracticality to living each day as if it were your last when you're not really sure that it is.

Jesus calls you to do two things at the same time: to live with the knowledge that your time could be up today or tomorrow, and to live your life as if you have many years left. Those are the two main points of the story from Mark's gospel that was read earlier.

The story goes like this: As Jesus and his disciples were leaving the magnificent Temple complex in Jerusalem, one of his disciples commented on the size of the building and its surroundings and implied that, like what it symbolized, it would last forever. It was the gate to heaven. He couldn't imagine the Temple ever not being there.

I know the feeling. Every morning when I come to work in this beautiful church building, I am inspired by its architecture and its overall beauty. I like to think it will be here forever. You probably feel the same way — not only about beautiful religious buildings but other impressive structures as well. I always admire our state capitol building in Lincoln. Every time I go to Washington, D.C., I am moved by many of our government buildings. When the two World Trade Center towers were destroyed by terrorists, it was impossible to imagine that they wouldn't be there forever.

When I've traveled to other countries, I've been inspired by the beauty of many cathedrals. Each time I've been in St. Peter's in Rome, I've been overwhelmed. The same is true of some of the ancient Egyptian temples and the pyramids.

So I can understand what the Temple meant to the people of Israel. It was the symbol of their deepest religious traditions from the past, and it gave them hope for the future. Therefore, I can also understand the shock of the disciples and others when they heard Jesus say, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

He didn't have to be clairvoyant to make this prediction. He was reminding his followers that every humanly designed and constructed temple or institution eventually will come tumbling down. Every structure, system, and doctrine for housing the holy will wear out its use and come to an end. St. Paul wrote: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels." It's tempting to confuse the vessel with the treasure and to believe that the vessel will last forever.

You can name any temple you prefer, any ground that is sacred to you because at one time or another it housed your soul. It could be a neighborhood, a sunset, watching the ocean waves, a family, a friendship, a precious memory, or a dream — they all have a life span, and they all come to an end. They are all finite.

In this story from Mark's gospel, Jesus was using the Temple in Jerusalem as an example to illustrate that all things on this earth come to an end, including your life and mine. That's important to remember. Can you name anything in life that doesn't change or go away? When someone asks me when the world is coming to an end, my answer is: the world is always coming to an end. All life, including human life, has term limits. The Bible says, "You are dust and to dust you shall return." It's difficult to admit this. Our culture sometimes calls getting older The Golden Years. A woman who is almost 90 told me it's the "metallic age"—a combination of silver hair, golden teeth, and a lead bottom.

Because we live in a youth culture, people don't want to be reminded that you get old, your body begins to fall apart, and one day you will die. Older people can make you uncomfortable. They remind you that your own body won't always remain smooth and responsive. The ideal

way to age, one person said, would be to become slowly invisible as you grow older, gradually disappearing without causing any discomfort to the young.

It's not easy to face the fact that you won't be as good at whatever it was you used to do. There was a cartoon in the New Yorker magazine that illustrated this. A physician is looking at a chart and says to her elderly patient: "It appears that you will definitely outlive your usefulness." That's something none of us wants to hear. Maybe usefulness is overrated.

In our materialistic, production-oriented culture, there tends to be a utilitarian view of human beings: You're good as long as you're good for something. Happiness is equated with usefulness. However, the Christian faith teaches a quite different message. The Bible tells you that you have intrinsic worth just by being.

The key to growing older gracefully is to do it without becoming bitter. You need to find ways to make your soul grow younger as your body grows older. That's an accomplishment. Finding reasons to hope, not only for yourself but for the future of others — those who come after you — that's an accomplishment.

There's one verse in that wonderful hymn by Isaac Watts, O God, Our Help in Ages Past, which is a good reminder that all things go away: "Time, like an ever-rolling stream, soon bears us all away." We need this reminder because it's so easy to assume that if we don't go on, the world won't go on. But it does. The disciples assumed that if the Temple was gone, God would be gone. The world would end. Not true. Each one of us will have to get out of the way someday and let someone else have a try at it.

Life is terminal. Everything comes to an end — even the Temple of God in Jerusalem. Entropy is as natural as growth and development. Your days are numbered, and that's what makes your days meaningful. The Psalmist urges you to "count your days." If you truly count your days, then things like petty grudges will mean nothing.

There's also something quite funny about growing older. The only time in your life when you want to be older is when you are a child. Children talk about ages in fractions. "How old are you?" "I'm four and a half." Notice that you are never thirty-five and a half. People use different verbs to describe growing older. You become 21. But you don't become 30 — you turn 30. It sounds like bad milk: "He turned, so we had to throw him out."

Then you are pushing 40; you reach 50, and then you make it to 60. By then, you've built up so much speed you hit your 70s and 80s. In your 90s, you start going backward: "I was just 92." Then the strangest thing of all happens when you reach 100 — you become a child again. You say, "I'm a hundred and a half."

The funny thing about growing older is how it surprises you. You'd think it would happen gradually, but it's not that way. I heard someone say, "The funny thing about old age is the way it suddenly sneaks up on you. You wake up, and you wonder how you got there."

Lest you misunderstand, Jesus was not saying that because all things go away, you shouldn't plan, dream, and work for the betterment of yourself and the world. But he is asking you to remember that the whole and final justification for your life and for the whole created order is never to be found within that order itself, but in the never-ending life and love of God who is always creating new beginnings out of endings.

This means also that you are not to be primarily concerned with dates, timetables, or predictions. Rather, you are to be concerned that you are cooperating with God by being compassionate.

The temples we build will not last forever, but that doesn't mean they shouldn't have been built. Our little worlds are always coming to an end — but the love of God is forever. Out of the ruins of the tumbling temples of our world and our lives can rise new beginnings. Amen.