***Sermon Series for Lent: 7 Stops on the Road to Resurrection -- #1 Reflection*** *a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Feb. 18, 2024*

*based on Mark 1:9-15*

Let me begin with a bit of fiction. It begins with a memorial service for a young woman — a wife and mother with a successful career who died decades before she should have. Several of her friends come forward one at a time, and deliver reminiscences and reflections on her life. They say she loved life, loved her husband, loved her children, loved her job. They say she loved her garden and her friends and her church. One of them departing from the norm, comes to the lectern and says,

*Five hundred twenty-five thousand 600 minutes, moments so dear,
525,600 minutes, how do you measure, measure a year?
How about love?*

You probably recognize it -- from the Broadway musical, *Rent.* The cast is a company of young adults, living on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Each is struggling to make it, or, at least, survive. I mean, they are musicians, composers, dancers, social activists; all are struggling to find out what life is all about and to pay the rent.

Several of them have HIV/AIDS. One in particular, Angel, is very sick. Several of them attend a support group. Sitting in a circle in an empty community center gym, reflecting on the future and what it will mean for them, one young man quietly asks, “Will I lose my dignity? Will someone care?”

It’s a brave and poignant story of people living with a fairly high degree of alienation—from families, from society at large, hanging on to one another for support, friendship, encouragement, love. They are literally, “rent,” meaning torn up, but they are also -- family.

On occasion they even become something like church for one another. They ask, for themselves and for all of us, “Will someone care?” They ask questions about meaning: “How do you measure a life? How about love?”

And so we begin the Lenten season, the traditionally somber season before Holy Week and Easter, a time when Christians remember the story of Jesus and his love and turn inward. They reflect; they do a self-examination.

I began it Wednesday by going to an Episcopal church close to my home to receive the imposition of ashes on my forehead. I appreciate the reminder that I am mortal.

This year Ash Wednesday coincided with Valentine’s Day so we have the theme of love heightened because it is set against the background of our mortality this year – the fact that time is short and therefore all the more precious.

*Five hundred twenty five thousand six hundred minutes.
How do you measure a life of a woman or a man?*

*In truths that she learned,
or in times that he cried?
In bridges he burned,
or the way that she died?*

Let me say a word about that last one. “The way that she died.” You might know the name, Catherine Coulson. Well, Catherine was an actor who I imagine many of you saw probably at Oregon Shakespeare in Ashland. In a long career, among many roles she played, the best known of them was the quirky *Log Lady* on David Lynch’s television series, *Twin Peaks*.

For those of you who didn’t have the pleasure of seeing her in that, she was the oddest one in the odd little town of Twin Peaks. She had this habit of always carrying a small log around in her arms as if it were a baby, and she seemed to share a [psychic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychic) connection with it, often dispensing advice and visions she insisted came to her from “the log”;

Well, Catherine was a good friend of mine. She died 5 years ago at the age of 71.

I heard about her passing from mutual friends and found the following information in a news piece noting her death. Allow me to quote it directly …

*Imagine the surprise of the answering service at Litwiller Simonsen Funeral Home when they found this log of a call Catherine made to the office 48 hours before she died.*

*CEC: Good evening, this is Catherine Coulson. That’s C-O-U-L-S-O-N, and the Catherine’s with a C and an -*ine.*I don’t know if you’ve been contacted yet by someone else, but I wanted to alert you to a pick-up I’ll need in the next day or so. I’ve never died before so I’m not exactly sure how long it will take.*

*LS: Oh, Ms. Coulson, I’m so sorry to hear this.*

*CEC: I do appreciate your compassion, but we all have to die sometime.*

 *LS: Would you like the funeral director to call you back?*

*CEC: That won’t be necessary. Is there any other information you’d need from me? My social security number? My address? Even my age?*

I know, it sounds a bit odd, but I know that she did that out of total love for her little family. She imagined how hard it would be for them to make that call and decided she could do it herself.

The Greek Stoic philosopher, Epictetus is remembered to have said, "It's not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters in life."

Well, Catherine Coulson knew how to deal with the good stuff in life and she also knew how to deal with all the rest that a relatively long life can throw at you.

She didn’t squander a moment. She was a wonderful actor. Thinking back on her life in the theater, on television and in film, it occurs to me that she never had a big part. What she had were a succession of these little quirky character roles, one after another, like the *Log Lady*.

She told me once how much she adored being cast to play the grave-digger in *Hamlet in her 60s.* The grave-digger scene is all of five minutes, but every word in it is pure gold.

I mean, in a play where the main character says, “To be or not to be,” a scene shared by Hamlet and a gravedigger has got to me seminal, and it is.

Now, think about our lives, yours and mine. Our lives are full of quirky little roles too, aren’t they – I’m talking about those highly defined little moments when we are with our loved ones, or little moments in our work days?

For example, say we’ve got something the people we work next-to count on us to do – and we know that they are counting on us to do it with our unique talent, our particular care or panache. And because we know that, we do it, and well.

Or maybe that defined moment is a ten-minute ride, taking our grandkids to school and we remember how we did this with our own children and that was long ago, and it all was over too fast, so this time with our granddaughter becomes all the more precious.

Or maybe it’s when we get some crazy news at the doctor’s and all of a sudden we have to decide how to react. Like Catherine Coulson deciding to call the mortuary herself.

I remember an older woman in a church I once served who had an appointment with her doctor following some cognitive tests. Her whole family went along, all eight of them. The doc said, “Mrs. Hunter, I’m afraid the tests are conclusive. All indications are that you have Alzheimer’s disease.

She took a moment, and looked around at everyone, and then she said, “You know, I don’t see this as my problem.” What she was saying was that by the time the symptoms would get really bad she wouldn’t even know it. Well, like my friend Catherine, it was her way of trying to soften the blow for the ones she loved. It broke the ice.

She grabbed the moment, filled it with some humor and a little grace, and it’s what we all marveled at years later at her memorial service.

Life – it’s full of pregnant moments. There’s a wonderful character in the film, *Field Of Dreams*, played by Burt Lancaster. His name is Archibald “Moonlight” Graham. He’s a doctor, but once long ago, he was a two-bit baseball professional who once got to play one inning of baseball in the major leagues.

But here’s the deal, he never got up to bat. His career amounted to playing that one inning.

In the film he tells the Kevin Costner character this: “You know we just don't recognize the most significant moments of our lives while they're happening. Back then I thought, ‘Well, there'll be other days.’ I didn't realize that that was the only day.”

Moments like that one go a long way toward defining a life, you know. They tend to wake you up. They can make you think the way Jesus is thinking in this morning’s text from the gospel of Mark, when he says, “Now is the time!” He says that partly because *now is* *all we got*.

Time passes and it gives us two lessons. 1) Time is unstoppable, and 2) every moment can be about love. I think that’s why most of us live to be grandparents. The profound loving and losing that is the core curriculum of life takes four to seven decades punctuated by three generations to play out properly.

You know, my daughter is 35 now, but I have a book that marks her first words, first steps, first tastes.

Why, then, can’t I remember the *last* time I carried her upstairs to bed, the last time she called me daddy, the last time I read a picture book to her?

I can’t remember because back then I didn’t know it was the last time.

If I’d known, would I have wept, marked the moment with an extra kiss,

held her closer, longer?

Do you remember any “last times?” Or, let me rephrase that – did you ever wake up and realize something had been *a last time* that almost passed with no notice? This stuff happens all the time.

From time to time I have spoken to you about Huston Smith, a wonderful scholar of world religions who was also a Christian. Late in life he wrote a lovely book called, *The Soul of Christianity: Restoring the Great Tradition*.

In that book he observed that the people who heard Jesus’ disciples proclaiming “Good News” were impressed as much by what they saw as by the word they heard.

Jesus’ followers were in awe of this man they walked with in the Galilee region of Palestine. As a result, they had been transformed, changed by just being with him. They became new people.

Smith concludes that it was love that did it, “God’s love was precisely what the first Christians felt. They experienced first-hand Jesus’ love and became convinced that Jesus was [in some way] intimately connected to God. Huston Smith says, “Once that love reached them it could not be stopped.”

Smith goes on to propose that just as the power hidden in the atom is only released by bombardment from without, so the love planted by God in every human soul is released and activated and called out by love’s bombardment.

I like that idea. Dr.Smith says, “A loving human being, is not produced by exhortations, rules, or threats.” Not at all. He notes that “love takes root in children only when it comes to them, embraces them, envelopes them.”

I have been so lucky to have been around lots of children all my professional life. I’ve mentioned before that I was once asked if I wanted to pastor a church five times as large as this one where everyone in it was 55 or above. I said, “No thank you.” Not because I don’t love older people,

of course I do, but because I think a church to be a church needs to have children in it. They give us all purpose and reasons to be church.

Huston Smith says, there is a great moment when the connection of love between generations happens. You can’t just say to a baby “I’m glad you’re here and I like you a lot” and hope he or she understands. No, we whistle, we make funny noises, we sing songs, we talk baby talk, and in doing that, we bombard little ones with beams of love.

I can see in little videos my daughter posts on Facebook how she is doing the same thing with her daughters and I can see how love, in turn, is called out of my granddaughters by that kind of hourly showering or deep adoration.

That is a great metaphor for the Divine–human encounter.

Rev, John Buchanan put it this way: “Lent begins with Jesus in the desert, dry, hungry, alone, maybe full of doubt and misgiving about his own life and his prospects; maybe full of uncertainty about what he is supposed to do next; maybe tired of the daily routine of his life, bored; maybe feeling alienated from his family; maybe feeling distant from and impatient and alienated from God even.

But angels come and minister to him, bombarding the vulnerable Jesus with beams of God’s love. Yes, and he learns that there is nowhere he can go, even the driest, loneliest desert, that God’s steadfast love cannot find him and come to him and embrace him and hold him and then call out of him his own fierce, unconditional love, his own love that will take him to the crisis of Good Friday and his cross and death—still loving, loving to the last, still willing to live his life, every minute of it, right up to the last minute, loving his friends, you and me, the whole wide world, answering God’s steadfast, faithful love.”

“How can you measure a life? How about love?”

As I have said, love is expressed best when we seize a moment, make eye contact with someone, let them know with a look, a gesture, or a word, that they are very special.

Well, 51,829 minutes are left in Lent, this holy season. There are some things we can give up in this season. People do that in Lent. But, I imagine there are also some things we can dedicate ourselves to, too. *Now is the time*. It’s all we’ve got. Let’s not let this chance to love and receive love, be squandered.

Amen