

Because I could not stop for death

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I sat down with a friend, and he told me about his holiday. He was about 35 years older than I was and his Christmas had been punctuated by the deaths of classmates, men and women he had been close to since childhood.

“Does it get any easier?” I asked.

“What?”

“The death. Does it get easier? When you get older and more friends die, does it hurt any less? I ask, because as a pastor, I feel the death of each parishioner. It's painful and I'm wondering if it's going to hurt any less,” I explained.

“I don't know,” he answered. “That's a good question.”

He thought about it for a few moments and told me how each death is different, varying in intensity according to the relationship, length, or the quality of life of the person who dies. Then he honed in on his daughter's death, a point of gravity around which every conversation with him seemed to settle.

I always wonder about our attitudes toward death. When I speak to friends who are atheists or agnostics and they explain why they don't believe in God, they often tell me how they could not believe in a God who allowed the death of (fill in the blank—soldiers, children, innocence, etc.). Many people speak of how a person didn't deserve to die, as if God tags on extra days as a reward for good behavior or takes them away for bad behavior.

Recently, I read *Wild*, as Cheryl Strayed called God a heartless b-, because God allowed her mother to die at 45. Anger at the deathbed of a parent is completely understandable. An early death feels particularly cruel. But I am an outsider who does not need to be Strayed's pastor. I am more connected to God than this maternal character in a book, so I had a detached curiosity to her attitude toward

death.

Is it fair to blame mortality on God? How many people let their faith slip away because God doesn't meet their deathbed demands? We all have to die. Our planet cannot sustain us living forever. It's actually amazing that we live into our 70s in our country. The life expectancy has rarely been this high. If a person lived in Angola or Afghanistan, 45 would be normal. That said, I don't want to die in three years.

I often worry about the extension of life, when we use every means possible to keep people breathing, no matter what their brains might be doing. What is our health care system going to look like with so many Baby Boomers heading to the end of life, with the swelling ambition of prolonging our days?

Of course, I would never say any of this to a church member or friend, but it makes me wonder about how we talk about death in the abstract, before it becomes the emotional tangle of grieving loved ones. (Is there such a thing as death in the abstract?)

Many people go to church, particularly so they can wrestle with matters of life and death. It is one of the only places in our society where we do struggle with mortality, detached from the presence of a morphine drip. I wonder how well we prepare people for death's inevitability. Do we use it, as a reward or punishment? Do we fight it, and do everything we can to suck the marrow out of life? Do we welcome it, as a calling? Do we point out the pulsing beauty in it, the cycle of all things?