

Human finitude (30A; Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8)

It's really tough to value the gifts inherent in finitude when beloved ones are dying.

by [Audrey West](#)

October 23, 2020

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

Having exceeded his anticipated expiration date (as he called it), my father would occasionally report on his dreams after rousing from sleep.

Most of the time those dreams flew him far above the great agricultural valley in which he lived, able to gaze from that height at the span of rice fields and fruit trees to the east or the flocks of sheep and cattle grazing on the verdant hillsides to the west. He would report to us about the incredible health and growth of the world he saw with each flight.

His dreams offered promises of well-being and vistas of freedom even as he was held captive to a bed by the unbreakable bonds of gravity, age, and a shrinking range of vision.

As the psalmist notes, human finitude is withering grass that turns to dust in the evening even as it awakens with hope for a new day in the morning.

It's really tough to value the gifts inherent in finitude when beloved ones are dying. The recent and brutal effect of a novel virus kills thousands of people around the world each day, while the deep-rooted brutality of racism and hatred has killed and continues to kill millions.

We cry out, “Turn, O Lord! How long?”

God shows Moses a preview of the promised land but does not let him enter. The next part of the journey toward fulfillment of God’s promise is turned over to Joshua, who is gifted with the spirit of wisdom. Together with the people he is leading, Joshua faces unpredictable challenges and damages along the way.

Turn, O Lord! How long?

Martin Luther King caught a vision of a promised land where God’s justice would rule for everyone, but Dr. King’s life was cut short by white supremacy and human hatred. Others stepped in and have continued to step up, gifted with the spirit of wisdom to lead the next part of the journey as well and as long as they are able. Their courage has brought everyone closer to the heart of God’s justice. But still there are shattering and devastating damages along the way.

Turn, O Lord! How long?

In an essay published this summer on the day of his funeral, civil rights leader and senator John Lewis called on the next generation to step in and step up—to be the “generation who laid down the heavy burdens of hate at last...[so] that peace finally triumphed over violence, aggression and war.”

Turn, O Lord! How long?

For all who follow Jesus in the call to God’s justice, the apostle Paul might add to Senator Lewis’s message these words from his letter to the Thessalonians: “[Have] courage in our God to declare the gospel of God in spite of great opposition...[and] speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts.”

Turn, O Lord! How long?