

On Life Going On. And Off

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Whenever we got into discussions about our advancing age, an old boss of mine always observed that he was nearer the end than the beginning, and he punctuated this with, “Do the math.” I didn’t have to do it. Had I known about it back then, though, I would have added a talking point of my own to our do-the-math conversations. I heard it on a Netflix show a while back and I’ve since taken it on as my own: “Everybody gets to be young. Not everybody gets to be old.”

My mother got to be old. Kind of. She was 78 when she left us. But a young 78. I had just seen her days earlier. My wife and I were playing wiffle ball with our children in my folks’ back yard. Mom and Dad came out to watch. Eventually, the two of them — side-by-each per always — became second base. It makes me smile even now to see Sarah and Paul running to them to be safe. Were it only that easy. Mom was alive and on the phone one minute, then dead on the floor the next. “Acute cardiac infarction,” the doctor said. Tears. So many tears.

Over the next several sad, sad days back then, I had to choose the images and words for those little funeral home memorial cards. With my sister’s help, I chose some religious pics for the card’s front. For the card’s back, I told Mary that I didn’t like any of the commonly used passages like the Serenity Prayer, or some verse about God calling his children home. She agreed, so we went with something that Mom said countless times whenever adversity hit the Reynolds household. “Life goes on, and it is good.” That’s it. “Life goes on, and it is good.”

I kept one of those little cards. While it’s yellowed with age now, the words still ring true. But my wife had only spoken the first half of Mom’s wisdom to our grandson recently when he offered a different slant on it. Jack had told his Nonnie that he had an owie. Gail looked at it and told Jack not to worry, because it would heal up and go away. Jack asked, “Why?” Gail answered, “Because that’s how things work. Life goes on...” This is where Jack immediately proffered his own bit of wisdom: “And then it goes off?” From the mouths of babes.

“In those days after that tribulation the sun will be darkened,” Jesus says in today’s Gospel. With these words and those that follow, Jesus continues the prophet Daniel’s first-reading discussion of cosmic upheaval. Scholars differ on what it all means. Jesus’s Passion and death? The destruction of the temple in 70 A.D.? The Parousia? Maybe. Maybe. Probably. The End Time could come any second now, yes, but with 2,000+ years of history on our side, most of us probably figure we won’t see it any time soon. But our own individual end times? That’s a whole other conversation. Jesus continues, “of that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” *Alternatively*, per Jack (with help from his Nonnie), “Life goes on, and then it goes off.”