

Sunday March 21st, 2021
Palm Sunday

Ecclesiastes 12 and 2 Timothy 4:6-8
“Finishing the Race”

I read an interesting account of a prominent family whose ancestors had come to America on the Mayflower, and their descendants included senators and Wall Street wizards. They decided to compile a family history, a legacy for their children and grandchildren. They hired a fine author. Only one problem arose; how to handle great-uncle George, the criminal, who was executed in the electric chair. The author said he could handle the story tactfully. So, the book appeared.

In it, it said, “Great-uncle George occupied a chair of applied electronics at an important government institution, was attached to his position by the strongest of ties, and his death came as a great shock.” Today as we wind up our journey through Ecclesiastes, I thought it important to bring some perspective to the preacher’s point of view, with someone else famous you have likely heard a great deal about. So, join me on a little trip of comparison.

First up, is a man of about my age, approaching sixty, give or take a few years—who sits down, takes up pen and parchment, and starts to write. Or perhaps he calls his secretary, and starts to dictate. He senses that his life is coming to an end very soon. All the signs are there. He knows that he will not be roaming on this earth much longer. But before his time is up, there is a lot that he wants to share with the younger generation.

He has been thinking about life. He has tried to make an assessment of his own life; of what he has done, what he has achieved, and what the impact of his life has been. He also looks ahead, beyond the horizon of this earthly life. He knows that life doesn’t end when we breathe our last breath. He knows that he is going to meet his Creator, the One whose image he bears, the One who has guided him through life to the point where he is now, the One who will be his Judge after his life on earth is over.

As I mentioned, I’m actually not talking about one man only. There are two in the Bible readings for today. In the Old Testament reading, the man is called the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Tradition ascribes this book to king Solomon who reigned in Jerusalem after his father David. Solomon was renowned for his wisdom and his piety. But the truth is that he also has a long and dark history of foolish choices and outright idolatry. Whether it was Solomon or somebody else penning down those words, doesn’t really matter. But what is very obvious when we read the book from beginning to end, is that the author takes a very cynical approach to life.

“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says preacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” Not a very uplifting message, is it? As he rambles on and on, he looks at the various aspects of human life. Look at work: it is meaningless. Look at leisure and pleasure: it is meaningless. Look at wisdom and study: it is meaningless. Look at success and wealth: it is meaningless. Not surprising, then, that Martin Luther and many other great leaders of the church questioned whether this book really belongs in the Canon of the Holy Scriptures.

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In the passage from chapter 12, he looks at the last phase of life: getting old. He describes the experience of getting older and finding that our physical and mental faculties gradually degenerate.

I have observed many people as they were aging, and they sometimes readily share their own experience. They have regularly reported a pain here and there; stiffness of the limbs; sleepless nights; fatigue and lack of strength; trouble hearing and seeing things like before; lack of appetite or of desire to do things and go to places; a fading memory... You name it. It is not nice to hear that, particularly because there was nothing that they or I could really do about it. Plus, I know what lies ahead for me.

The author of Ecclesiastes is a bit like that. He goes in detail through the most typical symptoms that accompany the aging process. But he takes great effort to put the ugly aging process into beautiful images and words of poetry. Of course, it doesn't make aging any easier, but it captures the holistic experience much better. It is as if the author looks around—to the sky, to the houses in the village, to the trees and the animals, and to the people—and he finds points of identification.

When he sees the old grasshopper dragging itself along, it is as if the man is saying: "I know what you are going through, grasshopper. I can feel your fatigue and your weakness in my own body." Immediately following the passage, in verse 8, the author repeats the words that he started the book with: "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says preacher. "Everything is meaningless."

And yet, the way he describes the aging process—the final descent to the valley of death—shows that there is a way of thinking about it that gives meaning to it. It is a process of saying farewells, of letting go, in order to be prepared for the journey to the other side. We are not being deprived of the good things that life offers without getting anything in return. Twice, preacher points out the destination of his journey, first in verse 5:

"Then people go to their eternal home"...And then in verse 7: "The dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." Preacher is going home; on his way from what in his poetic description looks like a ghost town to the eternal dwellings of God. Compared to what is ahead, everything he must leave behind may look utterly meaningless. But it would be wrong to conclude—like unfortunately so many Christians do—that this life on earth, this life in our mortal body, does not matter; that our heavenly destination and our eternal life with God are the only things that matter.

Preacher's conclusion is different. In the closing verses of his book, he gives us his conclusion: Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

Rather than calling this life meaningless in the light of what is to come, he says that everything we do and say and think and feel in this life, receives meaning from the knowledge that one day we will go from here to meet God, our Creator, and our Judge. However, I think we need another perspective.

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In the New Testament reading, we meet another sixty-year-old man, who looks back at life as he realizes that it is coming to an end. He, too, looks ahead to the point when he will stand before the eternal Judge.

But his tone is so different than the preacher's. His look at life is almost the exact opposite to what we find with preacher. It almost sounds as if he is bragging about himself. Like how meaningful his life has been, how successful he has been, and how his Judge will have to reward him when they will meet one day soon. The apostle Paul is in prison in Rome. He is awaiting his final trial by Emperor Nero.

It's not a promising outlook. In Romans 13, Paul tells the Christians in Rome to pledge loyalty and obedience to the Emperor. Well, it is important to know that, in the seven years between Paul's letter to the Romans and his second letter to Timothy, Nero changed a lot. He turned from a benevolent ruler, into a violent and sick tyrant, determined to wipe out his enemies. And Jesus and his followers are on the top of his list. Paul knows this, and he realizes that he doesn't stand a chance in his trial before Nero.

When Paul looks at his own life, he first looks at where he is now. He says: For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. That may sound like self-pity and resignation. But it isn't. If we want to grasp what Paul is trying to say here, we need to look at it in the light of the letter to the Philippians, which he wrote one or two years earlier together with Timothy. It was a letter full of joy and optimism.

But already then, Paul touched upon this theme of his departure, his death. He said that if the Philippian Christians lived out their faith in their day-to-day lives, they would shine like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then he will be able to boast on the day of Christ that he did not run or labor in vain. But even if he is being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice, and service coming from the young church's faith, he was glad and rejoiced with everyone he wrote to. So, they too should be glad and rejoice with him.

Paul is not complaining about being sacrificed. The drink offering in the Old Testament was not a sacrifice in itself, but always an additional gift to the actual sacrifice, whether a grain sacrifice of thanksgiving, or an animal sacrifice for sins. The idea of the wine that was poured out on the sacrifice was that of a drink for God—a gift of joy from the worshipers intended to give joy to the God whom they worshiped.

So, Paul is not complaining. He is describing the joyful thought of crowning the "sacrifice and service", coming from the faith of those who became Christians through his evangelistic ministry, and with the fulfillment of his own life. For him, execution by the Romans is not a sacrifice—it is a joyful passage from this life to the next.

When he speaks about his departure being near, there is not so much the pain of farewells and surrender, as there is the excitement of going on a journey that he has been longing for so long. The word "departure" that Paul uses here literally means "loosening" or "being released". It first reflects the exodus of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Secondly, it reflects the

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loosening of oxen from the plough after the day's work is done. And thirdly, it reflects the loosening of the ropes of a ship before it sets sail.

Paul is excited because he knows what is ahead. He is being released from hard work to a well-deserved rest.

He is being released from the shore of this life in order to make the voyage to the eternal Promised Land. Secondly, Paul reflects on his past, on his life and his achievements so far.

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” Or to use a slightly more appropriate translation: I have competed in the most precious contest, I have run the race to the finish, I have guarded the faith. Paul imagines himself as competitor in an athletics competition. He has competed in the contest that was the best and most valuable—not the 100-meter sprint but the marathon or triathlon. He has reached the finish. And he has meticulously kept the rules, so that he cannot be disqualified.

So, does he brag? Perhaps he does, but not about himself. It was Jesus who, on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus, had enrolled him for the most important competition in human history. Paul had not made that choice. — Jesus had. It was God who had brought Paul to the ends of the Roman Empire and, eventually, to the city of Rome and the palace of its Emperor. It was God, not Paul, who brought him to the finish line.

And it was the Holy Spirit who had empowered Paul and the churches that he had established to hold on to the faith and keep it undefiled, not Paul. Therefore, Paul wrote repeatedly to the churches: Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. And I will not boast about myself, except about my weakness. It wouldn't enter Paul's mind to say: “Meaningless, meaningless! Everything is meaningless!”

On the contrary, Paul, like no other, saw how God had given his life incredible meaning. God was able to use Paul but, before that, Paul had to give up his own ambitions. What drove Paul was not ambition but passion. And I believe that even that passion was a gift from the Holy Spirit. After looking back, here in 2 Timothy 4, Paul looks ahead: not to his trial or execution, but further than that, across the horizon. He writes:

“From now onwards, there is reserved for me the wreath of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day.” Paul has run the race and reached the finish. He was not disqualified. So, he looks forward to receiving his medal. Except that in those days it was not a piece of metal hung around your neck, but a wreath of laurel branches and leaves put on your head. It is the wreath of righteousness. Not in the sense that Paul had proven to be a world champion of righteousness.

The wreath that Paul received was righteousness. The righteous Judge declared Paul righteous. And as we know so well, that was not because of his own superiority, but because Jesus Christ was made sin for us, so that we would be made righteous with him, as Paul writes to the Romans. The anticipation of that personal encounter with God, the righteous Judge, gives life meaning. It

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gives meaning to everything that happened in Paul's life, including his failures, his weaknesses, his disappointments, his sufferings, his... You name it.

What about us? How do we look at our own lives? Do we say like preacher in the Old Testament that everything was meaningless, utterly meaningless? Do we look at our failures, our weaknesses, our misfortunes, and our missed chances, and say that we blew it—that we lived our lives in vain? It may be tempting to do so.

And it is probably equally tempting to do the opposite—to cover up the things we are ashamed of and just brag about who we are, what we know, and what we have achieved in life, even though it is not necessarily truthful and objective.

And what about the future? How do we look at our own future? Again, we can reflect like preacher on the long, tedious and frustrating process of getting old and gradually losing our strength, our memory, our eyesight and hearing, and becoming as helpless again as when we were born. But today's Bible readings show us a different way of looking at life—regardless of whether we are looking back, looking at today, or looking forward. Both preacher and Paul call us to look upward.

“Remember your Creator!” Remember that your life already had a purpose even before you were conceived in the womb of your mother. Remember that you reflect the image of your Creator. Remember that the one who created the Universe and watches over it day and night, watches over you 24/7. Remember that your Creator loves you and that he sacrificed his Son to prove just how much he loves you.

Life takes on a different perspective when we remind ourselves that there is more than meets the eye. We don't live in a mechanistic world with its unending cycles of day and night, light and dark, summer and winter, life and death. We live in God's world. “Remember your Creator!”

And moreover, we need to respond in submission and obedience. Without obedience to the call of Christ Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul would have drifted away from fellowship with his Creator. To remember our Creator means remembering that we stand before him as a mere creature. We are like clay in the Potter's hands. We must let ourselves be used, molded, and perfected in his hands.

Even if we feel we are good-for-nothing, and we have wasted our lives, still God can use us for his noble purpose; still God can give our lives meaning.

So, whether we are young or old, whether we have our whole life before us, or we already sense the degrading effects of old age in our bodies and minds, we can and we should remember our Creator and derive the meaning of our lives not from our own achievements or failures, but from him. He created us in his image, he saved us through his Son, he guides and inspires us through his Spirit, and he is there at the end of the journey.

So, remember your Creator—24/7. Amen.

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