

October 24, 2004
Job 19:23-29, II Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Dr. Lewis Galloway

“A Living Hope ”

The 20th century Irish poet William Butler Yeats was as passionate about the establishment of the Irish nation and the freedom of the Irish people as he was about his poetry and literary writings. His emotional intensity led many people to question the appropriateness of the words that are inscribed on his tombstone.

Cast a cold Eye

On life, on Death

Horseman, pass by!

One observed commented, “What a strange epitaph. Yeats never cast a cold eye on anything.”

Perhaps the quotation means something more than what it appears to mean. Yeats is not recommending that we live our lives without passion. He is calling on those who come after him to look with dispassionate clarity on the challenges of life and the reality of death and to pass by his grave to live their own lives with courage and passion.

You might say that in these verses from II Timothy, Paul is inscribing on his “tombstone” the words that he wants those who come after him to see. He wants to give to those who travel the path of discipleship words to live by.

Paul understands that he is near the end of his travels. He is near the end of his life. As you may remember from our previous readings from II Timothy, Paul, a prisoner in Rome, is writing to the young apostle Timothy. Timothy is in another part of the Empire, most probably in Ephesus which is located in modern day Turkey. Paul has been a spiritual mentor to Timothy. The two have traveled together and founded churches together. Now that they are separated by geography and circumstance, Paul is concerned that Timothy will lose heart with the discouraging news of Paul’s arrest and confinement. Paul sees that everything that has happened to him as served to spread the gospel. Paul shares his own understanding of his life, his death and his future life with Christ.

Paul says, “The time of my departure has come.” The word he uses for *departure* means *loosening*. The word refers to the unweaving of a piece of cloth. It is used for a ship casting off its ropes as it sets out to sea and for an army striking the tents and moving on. Paul, who has been on many journeys, is now casting off for the final journey of his life. He compares the end of his life to the pouring out of a libation or a

drink offering to God. His life has been a living sacrifice to God and now the time has come for the sacrifice to be complete. He envisions his life as fighting a “good fight.” He is thinking of an athletic contest such as boxing or wrestling or a race in which the winner receives a crown of olive leaves. In all of his travels as a witness to Jesus Christ throughout the Mediterranean world, he has “fought the good fight” and “finished the race.” In spite of the rejection, persecution, suffering, betrayal he experienced, Paul kept the faith entrusted to him.

Timothy has many more miles to go before his time of departure. He is like a young horseman passing by the grave of Yeats. What does Timothy learn from looking at Paul’s life and listening to Paul’s words? Certainly, he sees a man whose encounter with Jesus Christ transformed his life and sent him in a new direction. The persecutor of the church became the great apostle to the Gentiles. Christ gave Paul a spirit large enough to admit he was wrong and to come to a whole new understanding of the expansiveness of God’s grace for all people. Paul gave his life to serving Christ. No difficulty, hardship or adversity could turn Paul away from his mission to make Christ known.

When people look at our lives what do they see? Will the power of Christ’s transforming love shine through us? Do they see us giving ourselves to the adventure of faith or will they see us on a trip of self-interest, self-indulgence and self-preservation? A member of the church whose adult son was experiencing kidney failure, recently traveled a great distance to undergo surgery to donate one of his kidneys to his son. Thankfully both father and son are doing extremely well. During the process, the father sent me the following words.

Life is not a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well-preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside, thoroughly used up, totally worn out and loudly proclaiming, “WOW! What a ride!”

These words seem to capture something of Paul’s assessment of his own life. He sees his life as a sacrificial offering poured out to God.

Paul not only takes a careful look at his past life, he takes a look to the future God has planned for him. Paul knows that Jesus Christ is faithful to his promises. Over and over again, the gospel promises that no matter what happens to us on earth, Christ will welcome us into his kingdom. The Lord who sits on the throne of glory says, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was in prison and you visited me.” (Matthew 25:34, 35

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Using the image of the crown of olive leaves awarded to the victor of the race, Paul declares that the Lord is holding the victor’s crown for him in heaven. It is the crown of the Lord’s approval: “Well, done good and faithful servant.” Paul is not boasting in his own accomplishments, but in the Lord’s goodness and grace. The crown is not for

him alone, but for all those serve Christ and long for Christ's appearing. Paul takes stock of the future. He sees a future that belongs to God. He sees the triumph of Christ over all things.

. This faith in the future Christ has planned gives him hope for the present. A generation ago, the German theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote a book entitled, *A Theology of Hope*. At first glance, there does not seem to be anything unusual at all about the title of his book. Christian theologians have always written about our hope in God, the resurrection, eternal life and the world to come. When most theologians have written about hope, they have saved this teaching to the end of their theology as a kind of final topic. Moltmann helped the modern church understand that hope is not just something added onto the end of our faith so we have confidence in the world to come. Hope is the beginning of our faith so that we can live in the present in the power of hope. Christ gives us a *living hope* – a hope to live by. Because we know that the future belongs to God, then we can live each day with courage, confidence and even boldness. We live today in the realization of our future is already a reality in God. Paul says that Jesus has already laid up for him the crown of righteousness. Even his suffering and death cannot take away the future God has planned for him. As Christians, we live today as if the final victory of God is certain.

In his book *God has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu tells of the struggle against apartheid. He writes:

During the darkest days of apartheid I used to say to P.W. Botha, the President of South Africa, that we had already won, and I invited him and other white South Africans to join the winning side. All the “objective facts were against us—the passed laws, the imprisonments, the teargassing, the massacres, the murder of political activist—but my confidence was not in the present circumstances but in the laws of God’s universe. This is a moral universe, which means that, despite all the evidence that seems to be to the contrary, there is no way that evil and injustice and oppression and lies can have the last word.... God is in charge... It was these higher laws that convinced me that our peaceful struggle would topple the immoral laws of apartheid. (P.2)

Our faith in Christ gives us a living hope for the struggles of each day.

An elderly lady who is a member of the church was facing a big decision. As her health and mobility declined, she needed to move out of the home she loved and enter a retirement home in another part of town. She had to give up her independence, the old neighborhood, her car and most of what was familiar to her. Her friends asked her if she thought she would like the new place. She replied, “I know I will.” How did she know that? She had learned through many hard experiences, changes and losses that wherever we are God will be there first to make it home.

As we think about the future of this church, we realize that God is giving us fresh opportunities to be faithful witnesses to Jesus Christ. The church cannot stand still. We have a good fight to finish and a race before us. When we look at the indifference of people to the gospel, the fatigue of parents trying to raise their children in the face of multiple temptations, and the couples who are struggling to hold their marriages together, it is easy to give up our hope in God and to live out of fear. When our culture surrounds us with the false message that life is mainly about entertainment and acquisition, we find ourselves distracted from the race before us. When we fall prey to the anxiety that a shaky economy and a troubling world situation can create, we are tempted to live behind the locked doors of our uncertainty. Christ has called out of fear into hope.

We live by hope. We take our cue not from what is, but from what is coming to be. We look at the forces at work against God and we believe that nothing can ultimately defeat God's way in the world. Hope enables us to face tragedy without giving in to despair. In hope, we face death with the certainty that those who die will awaken in God's kingdom. In hope, we learn that a lifetime is too long to hold a grudge and just long enough to learn how to love. In hope, we fight evil with the courage that comes from knowing that even if we lose a few skirmishes, the final victory belongs to God.

What words will be spoken to mark our lives? When friends, strangers and even our children pass by our lives, may they say that we are a people with a living hope.