

Sermon Text for January 31, 2021

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Genesis 28:10-17, Philippians 1:20-26

“Eternity is now in session”

I'm travelling this evening and I had to get a covid test in order to travel. I know that probably all of you have done it so I'm guessing it isn't that big of a deal for you all. But do they really have to scrape brain tissue in order to get a test result back? I know that you have to do it in order to prepare for whatever comes next, in order to check the box to fly, but boy that was a bit uncomfortable. If this is the most that this period of time has made anyone uncomfortable you are doing pretty well. Think back on the arch of this period, remember when you couldn't find toilet paper and you were being rationed at home to a certain number of squares. We have seen quite a bit over this period of time that we never imagined we would experience. We have found that one of the themes throughout this time is that people are so worried about what comes next that the present is somewhat overlooked. As we focus on what is in the future we forget that the present, and people are right in front of us here and now.

In our Scriptures this morning we find both characters, Jacob and Paul, fully aware that their relationship with God here and now is what ought to define their lives here and now. Often we find our minds wandering to what heaven might be like that we forget that we have a task to do on this earth. What is that old cliché, often we find ourselves so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly good. Our focus for some of us in our spiritual lives is so on heaven that we miss the opportunities and the responsibilities that God has placed upon us here and now.

In my year book in high school you are supposed to put a phrase that defines you and I was asked to put one in not long after I came to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and so I put Life is awesome and then you go to heaven. We need to maintain the sense that this life is not just a passageway to heaven, but rather that this life has value unto itself and that value is valued by God. In the words of John Ortberg we need to recognize that Eternity is now in session.

Paul was able to say this even while he was in prison. Jacob is able to say this even as he is being, in his mind at least, pursued by his big brother. Are we able to say that life is awesome here and now and then we go to heaven even as we find ourselves in the midst of a generational defining crisis that goes way beyond cotton swabs tickling your brain or a shortage of toilet

paper? Can we say that Eternity is now in session, here and now, that life is awesome, that our lives are guided and directed by God here and now and so have value and purpose? Let's read.

READ

We all know the spiritual, Jacob's Ladder, We are climbing, Jacob's ladder. The Scripture that we read this morning from Genesis is the origin of that song and it is the origin for Jacob of a recognition that God's presence is not merely one in the clouds and one that has no impact upon this earth in which we live, but rather that he is seeing the presence of the Lord here on this earth while he is still alive. Jacob is in the midst of a major life crises as he as just left his home after stealing the blessing from his brother.

He tries to get some rest and uses a stone as a pillow, which may account for the dream that he has. He sees a ladder touching the earth and the top of it was in the heavens and angels were ascending and descending. This was not a static image where the ladder is just sitting there, no, there is action between heaven and earth and earth is being impacted by what is coming from heaven and maybe even heaven is being impacted by what is coming up from earth.

God speaks to Jacob and assures him that the promises he had received from his father were good, he will get the land that he was promised, he will receive the blessings, all of them, of the people of God. He eventually does become Israel after all. When he wakes up he makes this statement: God is in this place, and I had no idea. How often do we go about our lives totally oblivious to the fact that God is actually directing and guiding our every steps if we would just let him. From how much toilet paper we get to how we act and react to people and relationships around us. Nothing is shielded from God.

But then Jacob attributes the presence of God to the location and he says this is an awesome place, this is the house of God and this is the gate of heaven. The gate of heaven Jacob sets up as a single location. But we know of a Scripture that identifies the gate of heaven not as a location but a person. Go to John 10:9 and you will see Jesus describe himself as the gate and that no one gets to the Father except through him. Now that changes things from the perspective of how we see this story. God's presence here on earth is not relegated to a single location that Jacob identifies, but rather to a single person who is God in the flesh and that person allows us then to have the presence of God in all things that we do.

Jesus as the gate makes us realize the same things that Jacob realizes, this place is awesome, the Lord is in this place, I don't have to wait to get to the Lord, I can experience him now. Heaven is no longer the only house of God, earth is as well. Eternity is no longer relegated to heaven, eternity is now in session as we interact with God here on earth. Did you ever think

that as you go about your daily life that God is actually in your presence just as you are in the presence of God? What does that change if we look at things that way? If God is in your presence and you are in the presence of God not only now as we worship together but even as you turn off the computer or the TV or hang up the phone, how does that affect what you do and what you think?

Normally as I share Scripture with you I try to give you the link between the OT and the NT reading, and today it isn't a difficult link at all. God is present here and now is the link. But these verses in Philippians are difficult simply because they were difficult for Paul. He says in vs. 23 that he was hard pressed as he wrote these words which is a sign of a soul that is conflicted. He doesn't know how to think and how to feel. Well, what's the problem? The problem finds itself between heaven and earth. If we believe as Jacob stated, and we do, that surely the presence of the Lord is in this place, and this place is every place where we find ourselves, then what is better, to live this life in the presence of the Lord, or go to heaven where the Lord is present.

In some ways as Christians we are taught that heaven is far better than earth. We are taught to long for heaven because there all things will be touched by the presence of God. But I have come to realize that this is a false teaching even bordering on heresy. Because if you long for heaven then you can only assume that earth is devoid of the presence of God. We ought to be longing to be on this earth for as long as we can so that we can live our God's purposes through us. I know, I know, today is the wrong day to say that. You are not loving life at this moment. But your attitude and your approach to life has no impact upon the presence of God in this place, in your home, at your work, at your school. God is present with you whether you feel it or not.

The center of our Scripture for today in Ephesians, a Scripture which confirms our statement that Eternity is now in session, is vs. 21. Paul states that for me, living is Christ and dying is gain. Christ is our life, here and now. The relationship we have with Jesus defines everything else that happens around us. Our life has to be defined by this sense of excitement of how awesome is this place, how awesome is this earth in which we live. Jacob could say that while hard pressed. Paul eventually comes around to it as he is hard pressed. How do we react to being hard pressed?

He states that to die is gain. That is true, going to heaven, climbing that ladder will put us in the presence of the Lord. But don't forget that we are now in the presence of the Lord as well. This is what we often forget. We are face to face with our Savior now. And if we are not face to face, if we do not have a relationship with Jesus Christ then dying is not going to be gain. I want

to make that clear. Jesus is the gate, and that gate is here on this earth, and loving Christ and being a disciple of Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven.

There are a lot of verses in Scripture that describe this quandary, this being hard pressed between heaven and earth. Romans 14:8 states: If we live..., I Thessalonians 5:9-11 states: , Galatians 2:20 states: , II Corinthians 5:15 states: . Our life is significant only as much as we live our lives for the sake of Jesus Christ. For the live is Christ, to die is gain. So to this question of being hard pressed that Paul addresses while he is in prison, almost wondering what God is going to decide to do with him as he is on the brink of death in prison, he comes up with an answer in vs. 25.

I am convinced, I know that I will remain and work my..., and work really hard, work as vs. 22 states with fruitful labor. While it may be easier to go to heaven, that only benefits me. But if I were to remain then it benefits you, people of Philippi, Church of Philippi that I love and adore. Plus God promised that he would bring to completion the work that he has started among us. Granted, he did not promise that he would bring it to completion through me, but it will be brought to completion and maybe I am going to have a role in that.

Brothers and sisters eternity is now in session. We need to be thinking of this as we look to reopen in just a few weeks. As we gradually come back together again we need to come back as those who like Jacob are able to say that the presence of the Lord is not only in this place, but has been in our homes, has been in our dealings with each other has been in our families all along and it is our task to embrace the life that has been given to us as individuals and as his bride.