

THE GLORIOUS FUTURE

a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, August 20, 2017

Based on Ephesians 1:16-23; Hebrews 10:8-10; I Peter 1:3-4

The sermon this morning is the conclusion of a summer sermon series entitled, "The Hope of Heaven." Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

Several times a year in our church we host a class called "Think about Your Future." When we do, the electronic sign in front of our church says, "Think about Your Future," and then gives directions for where to park. I imagine that when people drive by, they might think that we are just putting out a little inspirational message.

Actually, "Think about Your Future" is the name of court-ordered defensive driving class for young people who have had traffic violations. The class happens once a month, and it is always well attended. In the class, young people are encouraged to think about their future before doing something foolish behind the wheel like speeding or texting or running a Stop sign. They hear a number of stories about how imprudent actions can have long-term consequences.

In a much larger sense, Think About Your Future could have been the title of this sermon series; for we have been considering how the Bible encourages us to think about our eternal future. In that drivers' re-education class, the phrase, "think about your future," is a warning—to avoid making decisions that would create a very negative future. The Bible contains similar warnings to avoid taking a path that would alienate us from God and impair our eternal destiny. As Jesus said, "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off! It better for you to enter the Kingdom with one hand than with two hands to go to hell." (Mark 9:43) The course we set in this life has very long-term consequences.

But when the Bible urges us to think about our future, it is not only in the sense of warning, but it is even more a positive encouragement to think about the glorious future that we have when we take hold of the gift of eternal salvation through Christ. One of the markers of Biblical faith is that people are motivated by the vision of a wonderful destiny to which God is leading us. The writer of Hebrews, in the passage we heard, noted that Old Testament people of faith were inspired by this sense that God was leading them toward a better future, even though they had only a vague idea of what that future was. As our passage said, "By faith Abraham . . . went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise . . . for he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God." (Hebrews 10:8-10) In New Testament days, the vision of God's future becomes clear. The "city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God," is pictured in wondrous detail in the book of Revelation, in a brilliant vision of the heavenly city, which we considered earlier in this sermon series. It is a picture of how, through the saving grace of Christ, we will share in a marvelous fellowship with God and with one another forever. So we find many passages throughout the New Testament which speak of how we can journey today in hope and strength and

joy when we keep our eye on that destiny which God has for us through Christ. As Paul says in Philippians, “Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:13-14)

This vision of God’s future is especially helpful when we are in tough times, because we can know that our difficulties are far transcended by the eternal blessings that God has in store. As Paul said in Romans, “I consider that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (Romans 8:18) Moreover, the conviction that we have an eternal destiny gives meaning to the present, because we know that what we do now in this life in service for God is a part of an everlasting story of God’s Kingdom. As Paul said in I Corinthians, “So, my brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” (I Cor. 15:58) Thus we are encouraged to live in the light of the glorious future that God has created for us in Jesus Christ. As Paul said in the passage we heard earlier from Ephesians, “I pray that . . . having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe.” (Eph. 1:18-19)

In all this we see how one of the central features of Christian faith is that it is future-oriented. People without faith have to think that we are just spinning our wheels on this earth—there’s no real point to anything, because nothing that we do is lasting, every loss is a tragedy, and it all just ends in oblivion. But the picture changes completely when we put our faith in Christ, for then we know that we are heading somewhere—toward that city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

This, however, does not mean that we just focus on our future in heaven to the neglect of the present day on this earth. You have likely heard of people who are “so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good.” That refers to some approaches to Christianity which would say that we need not worry about the problems of this world or bother trying to better the world, because we can just rest in the promise of the wonderful future that we will have in heaven. The actual Biblical message is quite the opposite—whenever the Bible gives us a vision of God’s future, the intent is that that vision should shape our agenda in the present.

The Biblical vision of heaven, as we have seen in this sermon series, is of a spiritual community in which people are in fellowship with God and in fellowship with one another. It is vision of harmony and well-being and peace, where people know themselves to be children of God and where they are all sharing together in the endless love of God.

Thus it is the precise opposite of what we saw being espoused last weekend in Charlottesville, Virginia. White nationalism is a contradiction of the gospel, for as Paul said, “In Christ there neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28) There is no room for racism or

bigotry in God's vision for our future. So if our lives are oriented toward the future God that intends for us, it means that we seek to move our world *today* toward that vision in which people are living in wholeness and harmony, where all people are valued and are sharing in real community together.

Thus the future that God wills for us sets our agenda in the church today. This means certainly that we stand firm against movements that proclaim hate and exclusion. It means that we seek to make God's vision a reality within the church itself—so that the church will be a welcoming community that models the kind caring fellowship that God intends for all humanity. And we reach beyond the church to make a positive impact on the world around us.

This past week, in response to the events in Charlottesville, our national United Methodist Church took out a full page ad in the New York Times and USA Today which lifted up the verse of Scripture, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21), and then directed people to a page on our United Methodist web site—umc.org/embracelove—which is all about what people can do to resist racism. This particular initiative actually illustrates several key aspects of how the church can make a difference in the world. (1) We take concrete actions—in this case, the simple step of placing an ad in national newspapers. (2) We lift up God's values, in this case resisting every form of prejudice. And (3) we use God's methods—we overcome evil with good.

The "do not be overcome by evil" ad was in response to Charlottesville, but, interestingly enough, in the New York Times it happened to be placed on a page that was directly opposite a large article about North Korea's Kim Jong Un. Evil has many faces, as we saw yet again this week in Barcelona. So the work of the church to overcome evil with good is in fact very broad; and this is why it is so valuable to be a part of a denomination like the United Methodist Church where we have the size and scope and the global reach that enable us to make a real difference in many different areas nationally and worldwide. In our efforts to move toward God's vision for humanity, our church is fighting hunger, engaged in extensive health care initiatives, supporting education, building communities, working for peace and human rights and equality—and we do all this because we are not satisfied to say that it will all be better one day when we get to heaven. We are seeking to apply the values of heaven to our own time.

In short, God's future is not only where we hope to one day arrive after death; it is the picture of what we seek to more fully create today. This, as we noted earlier in this sermon series, is the meaning of Jesus' instruction to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." (Matthew 6:10)

And yet it is easy to get discouraged, because we repeatedly see the fallen condition of humanity. In spite of our best efforts through the years, evil continues to rage. Even the church is imperfect, and we see the shortcomings in our own lives. Thus we recognize a central principle that we have noted throughout this sermon series—we will never arrive at a positive destiny on our own. We cannot finally overcome our human

brokenness on our own. We cannot reconcile ourselves with God. We cannot transcend death on our own. But God acts on our behalf. As Paul said, “While we were still weak, Christ died for the ungodly.” (Romans 5:6) Christ brings forgiveness for our sin and healing for our brokenness. Christ reconciles us with God, and opens the way through death into life everlasting. And Christ empowers us to stand firm against evil and to create a better world today. Thus we need not become discouraged—when we look beyond ourselves to the saving power of Christ, and open ourselves to how His Spirit will be at work through us. As Paul went on to say, “What can separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.” (Roman 8:35,37)

So we finally have hope. This is why this sermon series is entitled, “The Hope of Heaven.” Biblical hope is not the same thing as wishful thinking. It is not that we would like for things to be better in this world and that we would wish for life after death, and so we entertain fanciful notions that maybe it will be so. The Bible, as we have noted previously in this sermon series, has no place for this kind of wishful thinking. Hope, rather, in the Bible, is *a confidence in God's promised future*. We have hope because God acts to create for us a bright future, and is leading us toward that future. This was the ground of hope throughout the Biblical story—people found hope by looking beyond themselves to the saving action of God. And now God has acted supremely for our future through Jesus Christ. As it was said in the passage we heard this morning from I Peter, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” (I Peter 1:3)

The resurrection of Jesus means, quite simply, that evil and death are defeated. Therefore we can know that we are heading toward a glorious future—a glorious future beyond this life, and a future that can begin already to shine within this life—when we put our faith in Christ and journey as His disciples.

There's a story told about Albert Einstein, how he was riding one day on a train and was quite preoccupied with his work. When the conductor stopped to punch his ticket, Einstein began rummaging through his pockets, checking his briefcase, and then looking all around him, quite bewildered. He could not find his ticket. “That's okay,” the conductor said. “We all know who you are, Dr. Einstein. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry about it.” The conductor went on his way punching other tickets. Then, he turned to see Einstein down on his hands and knees searching under his seat and around the floor, obviously still looking for the lost ticket. The conductor walked back and said, “Dr. Einstein, please ... don't worry about it. I know who you are.” Einstein looked up and said, “I too know who I am. What I don't know is where I am going!”

Do we sometimes get so preoccupied in life that we forget where we are going? But we don't need to lose our bearings or “rummage around” to try to figure out where we might be heading. We can look to God's Word in the Scriptures. There we see the wondrous destination that we have through Jesus Christ. We can live, then, today, as

members of God's Kingdom; and we can journey throughout life in real joy and lasting hope as we travel, in Peter's words, "into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you." (1 Peter 1:4)