

# WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/APRIL 25, 2010

## VISION/ACTS 20:18-24

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### I. THE TEXT

In the late 1980's, *Life* magazine ran a feature article that asked forty-nine oddly assorted Americans to write a few words in response to the question, "What are we here for?" The writers included movie stars, cabbies, even a handful of theologians and philosophers. José Martinez of New York City offered a disquieting, frank summary of why he gets up in the morning: "We're here to die, just live and die. I drive a cab. I do some fishing, take my girlfriend out, pay taxes, do a little reading, then get ready to drop dead. You've got to be strong about it."<sup>21</sup> Well, that is certainly one perspective on the meaning of life.

In our text this morning, we hear the Apostle Paul's answer to why he gets up in the morning. Paul is meeting one last time with the elders of the church in Ephesus. Listen for God's word in Acts 20...

*<sup>18</sup>When they came to him, he said to them: "You yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, <sup>19</sup>servicing the Lord with all humility and with tears, enduring the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews. <sup>20</sup>I did not shrink from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to you and teaching you publicly and from house to house, <sup>21</sup>as I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus. <sup>22</sup>And now, as a captive to the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, <sup>23</sup>except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me. <sup>24</sup>But I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace.*

**II. PRAYER:** God be in our minds and in our hearts, in our being and in our doing. By your Spirit, speak to us of eternal things, weighty things that we might be strengthened for our living and for our loving. Amen.

### III. THE HAM PAN

Why do we do the things we do? A young girl watched her mother prepare a ham to bake for dinner one afternoon. "Mom, why do you always cut off the end of the ham?" she asked.

"Well," her mother replied, "because that's the way my mother always did it."

"But, why?"

"I don't know — let's ask grandma."

And so they called Grandma and asked her — "Grandma, when you baked a ham you always cut off the end — why did you do that?"

"Well, because that's the way my mother did it."

"But, why?"

"You know, I have no idea... that's just how I learned to cook a ham — you should ask ask great-grandma." So, they called great-grandma.

"Great-grandma, Grandma says that when you baked a ham, you always cut off the end — we're trying to figure out why you did that?"

"Well," Great-grandma said, "I hated to waste the meat, but, truth is, it was during the Great Depression and all we had was one pan and it was just a little too small."

### IV. EXAMINING LIFE

Why do we do the things we do? So much of what we do, we do out of habit, without

lots of thought. On the one hand, that is actually a good thing because if we had to think through our rationale for every one of our thousands of daily movements, we'd be paralyzed. At breakfast this morning, why did you pour your Corn Flakes into a bowl rather than a coffee mug? As you got dressed this morning, why did you start with your right leg when you put on your pants or pantyhose? Do you stop and consciously think about any of these things? I hope not... on one level, there's a big part of what we do that is best left in the unconscious. It's called procedural memory – like driving a car or sitting at the right spot on the piano bench. In many areas of life it really doesn't matter – cutting the end off a ham, putting our left shoe on first; neither is likely to derail our career, or make or break our family relationships.

But on another level of our lives, if we live without examination we can, over time, find ourselves where we didn't want to go, doing things we really don't want to do, wondering why... and how on earth we got there. And we can wake up at the end of a lifetime or even at the end of a decade and wonder where on earth it went and why we have so little that is meaningful to show. Or even worse – how did we get into this mess.

Why do we do the things we do?

## V. PAUL'S STORY

The Apostle Paul was nearing the end of his life. This was a sad day for Paul... he sensed this would be his final visit to Jerusalem, and he would have to sail past his beloved Ephesus – the church he has founded and in which he had labored for three years. So, from Miletus he called for the elders from the church at Ephesus to come see him for one **last** Session meeting, one **last** tender conversation before he heads back to Jerusalem. We may surmise from other passages that in a few minutes they would kneel for prayer, share their sorrow, their tears, perhaps have a laying on of hands, and they would walk Paul to the ship that would carry him to Jerusalem... he thought... to die... this was farewell. Such a moment calls forth retrospection and introspection, self-examination... a weighing of what matters.

Paul begins his final words with an accounting of his life... he lists the things he's done. He'd served with humility, preached with fervor, taught with diligence... he's proud of what he's done... there are no regrets... he's done life well. And then he tells the elders **why** he did the things he did...

Listen again to his remarkable words... his “going off to die” words. *“However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me — the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.”*

These words are Paul's vision for his life. He lived his days with clarity about his destination, conviction about what sort of person he wanted to become and the work God wanted him to accomplish. And then Paul lived life with that end in mind. He'd wrestled with the question – “in the end of the day... when all is said and done... what will matter most? What will I want to look back on and say – I have completed my work.” Once Paul knew the answer, he walked that direction until the day he died.

Three important things come to light about Paul's vision for his life...

1. God given... God had given Paul his task, his direction... Paul took his cues not from what was going on around him, but from God.

2. Larger than himself... responsibility for the good of the whole community, the whole world, not just his own quality of life.

3. It was worth dying for... made bearing the sacrifices possible, not easy, but possible because it inched him toward the completion of his mission.

Indeed, Paul knew why he did the things he did.

## VI. WHAT ABOUT US?

Why, then, do we do the things we do? I suspect that most of us don't have the kind of clarity that Paul had... and without a certain amount of clarity it is easy to get caught up in the mission of whatever's going on around us.

As we look back over the past handful of decades the collective mission of our culture seems pretty clear. We've been led to believe that more and bigger are synonyms for better. The problem is, it hasn't worked...

our planet has suffered as we've taken from it without replenishing,

our world economy could hardly be more out of balance,

our sense of satisfaction has plummeted as we've raced through relentless days.

It is a mission that has not made us any happier or deepened the meaning of our lives.

In 1958 when economist John Kenneth Galbraith appropriately described the United States as the "Affluent Society" 9.5% of U.S. households had air conditioning, 4% had dishwashers, fewer than 15% had more than one car. By 1980, when Ronald Regan beat Jimmy Carter because of the widely held belief that people were suffering economically, the percentage of homes with air conditioning had quintupled, the percentage with dishwashers had increased more than 700% and the percentage with two or more cars had about tripled. Yet, despite astounding improvements in our gadgets, machines and appliances... thought to constitute the 'good life' — polls showed that we Americans felt significantly less well-off than they had 22 years earlier.

Fast-forward almost 30 years and the 3 car garage is the new norm, not only are our homes air conditioned, our cars are as well. Yet as a society it doesn't seem that our sense of well-being has improved one iota. The collective "more and bigger" mission still isn't working. In the sad, provocative words of George Bernard Shaw almost a century ago, "All our progress is but improved means to unimproved ends."<sup>iii</sup> Our collective mission is one that has not made us any happier or deepened the meaning of our lives one bit. Rather, masquerading as what matters most, it has distracted us from examining what is essential... that is, from prayerfully wrestling with... from reflecting on, praying over, pondering, talking with one another about the soul's ultimate questions about meaning and purpose...

what sort of person do I plan to become?

what do I want my life to be about?

what will be the quality of my faith?

to whom or to what do I give my ultimate loyalty, deepest love, full and total service?

when I get to the end of my life, what will matter most?

## VII. IMAGINING THE END

What sort of person do we hope to become? Steven Covey, in his book *First Things First*, urges readers to live their lives with the end in mind. He invites them to visualize their eightieth or ninetieth birthday party. He writes – imagine a wonderful celebration where friends, loved ones, and associates from all walks of your life come to honor you. Imagine it in as much detail as you can – the place, the people, the decorations. See these individuals in your mind's eye as they stand, one by one, to pay tribute to you. What do hope these people will say? What qualities of character do you want them to be remembering? What contributions to

their lives and to the community do you hope they will be able to name? What difference do you want to have made?<sup>iii</sup>

I would add that God ought to be invited to that imagined party – what do we hope God will be able to say about our lives? Now, having imagined the party work backward from there – what sort of life will make that party happen?

That it what it means to begin with the end in mind. To live with vision... to live the day-to-day of life with a clear, God-given sense of what we are hoping for at the end.

### VIII. THE EXAMINED LIFE

What are we here for? A more philosophical-sounding form of the question: Why do you get out of bed in the morning? Surely there are the usual, and necessary, answers – there are appointments to keep, somebody needs to pay the bills and get the car in for an oil change. There will be good food to eat, pleasant people to see, an interesting show on the History channel. Our days pile one on top of the other, filled to the brim with obligations and joys. But for many, sooner or later, as author Michael Lindvall puts it, “a life lived for reasons no more than duty and pleasure becomes soup too thin to sustain life. This awareness grows slowly in some, like the tide rising to the legs of your beach chair while you have your nose in a book. It intrudes into other lives like a bolt of lightning out of a sudden thunderstorm. Either way, it demands a response to the older and deeper questions: What does life mean?”<sup>iv</sup>

José Martinez answered the question, “We’re here to die, just live and die. I drive a cab. I do some fishing, take my girlfriend out, pay taxes, do a little reading, then get ready to drop dead.” There are other, perhaps better guides from our own sacred tradition as we wrestle with the big questions. Some 365 years ago the Westminster Shorter Catechism asked and answered, “What is the chief end of man? Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.”

Very, very long before that the prophet Micah confronted the same – and perennial – human question in this way: What does the Lord require of you... but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Jesus’ answer? “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal... but seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness.” “You are the salt of the earth... the light of the world.

Whether we have considered our destination or not, we are moving toward one. Why do we do the things we do? What will all our days piled on top of one another mean? What sort of person are you planning to become? What vision do you and God carry for your life? What is the end **you** have in mind?

**IX. PRAYER:** You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you. As we examine our lives and consider their meaning... grant us a vision larger than ourselves... a vision worth living for... a vision worth dying for. **AMEN AND AMEN.**

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<sup>i</sup> As quoted in Michael L. Lindvall, *The Christian Life: A Geography of God*, p. 5

<sup>ii</sup> From *The Good Life: Truths That Last in Times of Need* by Peter J. Gomes

<sup>iii</sup> Steven Covey, *First Things First*, page 107-9.

<sup>iv</sup> Lindvall, p. 6.