

Luke 12:49-56

[Jesus said:] "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided:

father against son
and son against father,
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

Sermon: 500 Meters to Go?

As some of our students start heading off to college, I can't help but remember what it was like for me when my parents packed up our family car and drove me down to New Brunswick, New Jersey, to start my freshman year at Rutgers. I was really not ready for college – barely 4 months past my 16th birthday. It is a measure of how immature I was that at the time I thought saying I was 16 made me sound old.

The academics at college were not my real challenge – it was the temptation of too much free time and the abundance of beer joints and bad company you find in a college town. Luckily, my father had suggested that I might want to try out for the rowing team. He had never rowed himself, but a good friend of his, a fellow named Mel Hein had done some rowing at Washington State. Although Mel was who was a perennial all pro center and would go on to be a member of the football hall of fame, he declared rowing was as tough a sport as football. His rowing stories had always captured my father's imagination so he told me to look into it – which I did.

Rowing was about the best thing that happened to me at college because it absorbed all that free time and kept me away from the bad company and out of the beer joints – most of the year, anyway. We only rowed about eight races, usually starting the first week in April, but to get to those eight races required year round conditioning and countless hours of practice.

Rowing events are physically demanding and you spend every ounce of your strength, conditioning, and determination in the course of a tightly contested race. I was able to row twice in the national championships, where my senior year our crew finished seventh over-all on a three mile course.

But a three mile race is really just a form of punishment. What I grew to love was rowing the Olympic distance, 2000 meters. In rowing 2000 meters is considered a sprint. The world record for eights – that eight rowers and a coxswain – is 5 minutes and 19 seconds. Of course wind and current can have a big influence on time, but I remember always thinking that once you came out of the start of the race, the 2000 meter distance took about 200 strokes. And even if you were almost entirely out of gas, when the coxswain banged on the side of the boat and shouted out 500 meters to go, you knew it was time to pick up the pace and put on the power because that was the final sprint of the sprint, and the finish line was just ahead.

Once you were over the line you could rest, but you really did not want to finish and have any regrets because you hadn't given it your all.

I think one of the appealing attributes of sport is that it is so clear cut. Here's your race course – it's two thousand meters long. When you pass the point that says 1000 meters you know you're half way. When you hear 500 meters to go, you know the finish line is in sight. You always know where you stand relative to the length of the race.

Life, on the other hand, is not so clear cut. A couple of years ago when I passed my 60th birthday I thought back on those 2K sprints and wondered where I was in this race? I know I'm well past the thousand meter mark, but am I hearing someone call my name and say "500 meters to go"? I don't know.

My father, when he turned 90, kept saying he didn't want any new clothes for his birthday – he wouldn't be around long enough to make it worth-while. We didn't listen to him and bought him a t shirt that said "I'm not 90, I'm 18 with 72 years experience," and a bright red LL Bean shirt. He got three years out of those because even at 90 his race still had a ways to go. None of us know the day or the hour.

Jesus said to the people: You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

Paul wrote: let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

But if I don't understand the present time, it can be a little confusing to know just how to run this race.

This morning we opened our worship by reading portions of Psalm 90. According to tradition Moses composed this psalm as a meditation on God's timeless eternity and our time-bound frailty:

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. You turn us back to dust, and say, "Turn back, you mortals." For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.

Moses continues with a few thoughts that were not included in our call to worship: The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. So teach us to number our days that we may gain a wise heart. (Psalm 90, NRSV)

I mentioned that I was just four months past my 16th Birthday when I went to Rutgers – that was 5,974 days of age. I've been the minister here now for twenty years – that's 7,300 days, of which roughly 5,000 would be numbered as work days. I've been married 30 years and 3 months – 11,041 days – but who is counting?

So teach us to number our days that we may gain a wise heart.

Moses said the days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps 80 – that's between 25 and 29 thousand days. Each day is very precious when you can only number them in the thousands, and yet a thousand years in the sight of God are like a few hours that have past, like a watch in night.

The image of the watch in the night is one Jesus uses to describe how the believer should approach this race we are all in together – he tells several parables about being ready, alert, awake for those critical moments when the glory of God breaks through the darkness of night and the glory of God is glimpsed like the first rays of light in the early hours of dawn.

Jesus reveals that although we are creatures of time, we are also heirs of eternity. Eternity is not somewhere off in the future – eternity is happening now. We have a foot in both camps, so to speak, because in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ God has broken through and raised up for us the sign of our salvation:

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

When we used to row down the course at Rutgers, we were so focused on our race that we didn't realize the shoreline was crowded with fans, family, and friends who were cheering us on – urging us to keep focused, stay strong, and get across that finish line.

When Paul writes: Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us – Paul is reminding us that we have this cheering crowd for this life as well – those who have gone before and now stand on the other shore urging us to keep focused, stay strong, and get across the finish line.

But the race Paul speaks of is not a matter of who crosses first or second or third – the race Paul speaks of is not completed because we have saved enough for retirement – because we have gotten a gold watch or won an award or been listed in Who's Who.

No, Paul speaks of the race of righteousness, faith, love, and hope – the race where a thousand years are as one day in the sight of God; the race where the finish line is eternity, and where, at 2000, 1000 or 500 meters to go, we find our strength when we look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

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