

Title: Two Pictures: The End and The Beginning

Text: Psalm 148 and Colossians 3

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Here we are, New Year's Eve. The turning of the year. People view the year change differently. Some people are eager for the last year to get behind them. Other people wish they could relive last year over and over again. But regardless of their feelings of the past, everyone recognizes that a milestone has been passed – and we cannot go back, we can only go forward. Those kinds of transitions happen all the time – moments when we realize that the old is no more and the new is coming. Sometimes they are full of excitement and hope. Sometimes fear. Sometimes deep sadness. Sometimes all three.

When we step on our first school bus.

When we sit behind the wheel of a car with no one else in it for the first time.

When we wave goodbye to our parents at college.

When we find out we are pregnant.

When we wave goodbye to our kids at college.

When we move far away.

When we lose someone we love.

Endings and beginnings are not new things – they happened to people in the Bible as often as they happen to us – maybe more often. And so it is not surprising that the Bible has something to say about how to end things and how to begin things faithfully. What is really neat is that two of the four lectionary passages for today deal with endings and beginnings – appropriate and probably intentional given the occasion. Today I would like to talk with you a little about these passages – one dealing with an end and one dealing with a beginning. Since one thing must end before another can begin, let's start with the passage from Psalms, which addresses endings.

The book of Psalms contains 150 psalms or sets of song lyrics. Scholars now believe that they were written in different times – some maybe as early as the reign of King David, which would put them around 1100-1000 BC, and some as late as the Maccabean revolt against the Greeks, which would be as late as 200 BC. At some point, the individual psalms were combined into the anthology which we now know as the book of Psalms. They were almost certainly combined in the order we know them today by the time of Jesus, and were a favorite of the followers of Jesus. The book of Psalms is cited in numerous letters and gospels. Luke records Jesus as quoting Psalms in his discussions with the Jewish leadership. In Acts, one of the disciples of Jesus quotes Psalms in an attempt to evangelize. And in Colossians and Ephesians, Paul exhorts the Christians to sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God.

Not only do the individual psalms of this book have theological significance, but way the book is ordered has significance too. Someone (or more likely a group of someones) had to put this book together, and therefore they had to choose what order to present the material. Think of making a mixed CD for some occasion – a birthday, an exercise routine, a wedding reception. Once you have your list of titles, your work is only half over. You have to plan the order to present them to the ear and that order matters a lot. You have to think of where your listener is

when they start listening and where you want them to be at the end and how to move through the tracks to get them from point A to point B. Scholars call this ordering of material: redacting. And, in their infinite creativity, they call the person or people who do the compiling redactors. So, if you were a scholar, you would ask about the theology of the redactor, and you would mean, what did the person who put this book together want us to glean from the way he put it together.

For instance, flip to the beginning of the book of Psalms. An easy way to find the book is to take the whole Bible and open it halfway through. You will probably either hit Proverbs or Psalms. If you hit Proverbs, start paging back – Psalms is only one book earlier. When you hit Psalms, go to the beginning of it. Psalm one begins:

Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law they meditate day and night.

In one translation, that word meditate is translated murmur¹ – imagine someone walking around muttering to themselves, and when you listen closely, you hear them talking to themselves about the law. For the redactor of the book of Psalms, everything starts with the law, or the teachings of the Torah. This is where the everyday Jew should begin, so this is where the book of Psalms begins.

Our passage for this morning comes from the other end of the book, Psalm 148. Psalm 148 addresses God's creation and calls it to praise in three parts. It starts with the heavenly bodies: angels, sun, moon, stars. Then it calls for all things on earth to praise: sea and sea monster, weather patterns, mountains and hills, all the animals. Then, all humanity – praise the Lord: kings, all people, men, women – everyone! Psalm 148 has a very different feel from Psalm 1 – look how it starts: Praise the Lord! Look how it ends: Praise the Lord! Now, flip a page earlier and look at Ps 146: how does it start and end: Praise the Lord. Keep scanning through 147, 148, 149, and 150. The last five Psalms are praise Psalms – their sole focus is on praising God. Look at how the last one ends – let everything that has breath, Praise the LORD! And, it is not just the last five psalms. Throughout the entire books of psalms, the theme of praising God slowly builds, until it reaches full strength here. In the first 100 Psalms the phrases 'Praise the Lord' and 'Praise God' appear 6 times. In the last 50 psalms, those phrases appear 47 times, 15 times in the last 5 Psalms alone.

If you believe, as I do, that the way books are put together teaches us something, then it is significant that the book of Psalms progresses with more and more praise, and ends with 5 Psalms in a row that cry, Praise the Lord. I think it speaks to the way things end. The way things are supposed to end is praise. That is the way that the writer of Revelation views heaven. Time will end with one giant praise party to God. That is how eternity will be. And not only is the Psalmist signaling the temporal end, but also the functional end. What is our purpose? What

¹ New Jerusalem Bible

is our end? To what are all our actions pointed, God and praising God. Thus, it is appropriate, as another year ends, and as we symbolize the passage of time with the ball drop and as we recognize that history is linear and moving, that we remember where it is moving to and what we are here for.

So, that takes care of the end, but what of the beginning? For the New Year signals just that, a new year. And even if we decide that our purpose is to praise God, there is the significant question of how to start doing that. When you wake up tomorrow, the calendar will say 2007 and you will have 365 blank squares to fill up. And a good question to ask yourself tonight is, "How do you want to fill those squares?" People ask each other this all the time, whenever they say, "what are your resolutions for the next year."

This is where the passage from Colossians comes in. The third chapter of Colossians is sort of like Paul's advice on New Year's resolutions. The whole chapter is worth reading, but I want to focus on the final sentence. "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus." I love this line, but at first I hated this line. The sentiment behind it is one of the most often spoken in all of Christendom. It is trite – it is simplistic – it is almost too elementary to even be heard by the jaded likes of us anymore.

And we are jaded for good reason. We have heard too many hypocrites say, "do something for Jesus" when what they really mean is "do the thing I want you to do and don't resent me for making you do it." We have seen too many Christian leaders and role models not practicing what they preach. Too many people who guilt others into walking their talk. Sometimes I understand why so many non-Christians are angry at Christians. It's not that Christians are worse than other people, it is that we claim to be better and are not. It is our hypocrisy that kills the message.

But I want you to remember one thing. The quality of the message is not determined by the quality of the messenger. And the fact that some people use Paul's writings to further their own agendas does not make his original message untrue. This week, when I read this simple line of Paul, somehow it cut through to me. Do everything for Christ Jesus. Everything you do, do it in such a way that you would be proud to hold it up to God. What a new year's resolution! Forget all year, my question to you, and please believe me, it is a question to myself as well, is do you remember one day when you could say that everything you had done that day was honorable and worthwhile?

One of my favorite movies is *The Last Samurai*.² The movie, set in 19th century Japan, centers on an American military man named Captain Algren. He is hired by the Japanese government to put down a Samurai uprising. He ends up being captured and lives with the Samurai for several months. In one scene, he is writing in his diary. He writes: "1876, day: unknown, month: unknown. I continue to live among these extraordinary people. From the moment they wake, they devote themselves to the perfection of whatever they pursue. I have never seen such discipline."

² *The Last Samurai*. Dir. Edward Zwick. Perf. Tom Cruise, Ken Watanabe. Warner Bros., 2003.

What I encourage you to think about, as you go your way this New Year's Eve, is what it would be like to try to live one day that way. Don't commit to doing it for a year – just try it for a day. Or, if that is too difficult, try it for an hour. Postpone selfish fights. Keep yourself from temptation. Devote yourself to the perfection of whatever you pursue...and pursue something good. Try to live one hour where you are completely proud of that hour. And see what happens.

Christians are not the only people of faith who try to do these things. A few months ago, our church was honored to host a Muslim Iftar dinner. At that dinner, a Muslim man spoke about what fasting during Ramadan is about. He said that fasting is not only about food, or about sexual encounters, the two items which get the most press. It is also about anger, gossip, hate, and all the things which are enemies of following God. He said that if someone tries to pick a fight with you or get you to speak harshly or get you to gossip, you are to tell them, "Not today, I am fasting."³ That is not unlike what we could do, for a day, or an hour.

So, as you go from this place today, remember your end – your purpose – to praise in everything you do. And think about how you could begin to start down the road to that end. One step, one hour, one day at a time. The New Year starts tomorrow. Amen.

³ Dr. Hakke Ocal. Muslim-Christian Iftar Dinner. Oct. 14, 2006. Fairlington Presbyterian Church and the Rumi Forum.