

FINISHING WELL, STARTING STRONG

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I want to suggest to you today that there are days that are more full of time than others. You may not agree, but let me explain. Consider the newspaper these recent mornings and the ones to come. They have been beckoning us backwards over the last twelve months. The top news stories of 2016, greatest accomplishments, best photos. Within the very same pages are advertisements for that which will help us plan the next twelve months. Calendars, budget apps, under-the-bed Tupperware organizers. All this right in the middle of the twelve days of Christmas. The carols are just falling from our lips as the health clubs begin tugging at our hands. The music of last week fades and the Stairmaster of next week looms. We are here with a yesterday full of yesteryear and a tomorrow full of tomorrows and a today full of both. We're at a swivel point with two days, the last day of the year and the first day of the year, which are more full of time than other days of the year.

This week of the year in Rome, every twenty-five years there is the Ritual of Passing through the Holy Doors, and it dates to the year 1500 A.D. It is a ritual full of time. It is a day with more time in it than others. At the beginning of the Christmas week, every quarter century, in the four major basilicas of that city, the pope approaches holy doors that, interestingly

enough, are bricked in. The walled off doorways represent that within us and between us that cuts off, closes in, and separates from. You know how this goes – the errant word that has a touch of meanness in it (“You, jerk.”), the selfish act (your gluttony before your partner’s need), the unintended neglect, the insensitive (or perhaps, contemptuous) look ... and a relationship starts to have a wall. It may be our thinking that separates us even from ourselves – like chronic insecurity or jealousy -- or it may be our hostilities, the kind that turns into war, that keep us from each other.

In the ritual, the pope takes a golden hammer and strikes the brick. Then the wall of bricks is shattered and the debris moved away while the pope moves through the doors. The hammer represents God’s grace, how he can break through our walls, dismantle our mistakes, heal our hurts, and reclaim those walled off places in human life.

In this time full of time, I’d like to suggest that one thing that can create a wall is our thoughts about time itself. We live in our society in a swirl of time. We have fast cars, fast food, and fast internet connections. We have cell phones, drive-through pharmacies, and one hour cleaners. We used to have one-hour photos, but now with digital cameras we get our photos right away. And on those cell phones or computers we can do *instant* messaging. I was in the shower the other morning and I put some new conditioner on my head. I glanced at the bottle. It wanted me to stay put for 3 minutes. 3 minutes! I don’t have 3 minutes! What are they thinking!!! Give

me my 12 second one-step shampoo and conditioner in one, please.

And yet, in so many ways, for all the *more* we are doing, the *less* we seem to be. For all the fuller our schedules, the emptier our lives. And I'd like to suggest to you today that this is not a logistical matter, but a spiritual one. This isn't about multi-tasking; it is about a groundedness of the soul. This isn't about a better day-timer, it is about better thinking ... about us and God.

Let's, on this last Sunday of the year, bring the golden hammer of grace to our thinking about time.

Interestingly, in this Advent and Christmas season, so many of the Bible passages come from Isaiah. "A virgin shall conceive and you shall call him 'Immanuel.'" That's in Isaiah. "To us a child is given ... wonderful counselor, prince of peace." That's in Isaiah. But there is also one that is quoted in the NT more than any other, and it is in chapter 28. And it says something about us and him and time.

The chapter starts out as a warning against Ephraim (or Samaria, the northern kingdom). In Israel there was a civil war and the country divided north and south (as our own country once did). The secessionists were the northern kingdom. They get addressed as the chapter begins and there's a verse in what is said to them that is so apropos: "He promised you perfect peace and rest, but you refused to listen." (v.12) With God there is perfect peace, and what do we have? Hectic pace. Why? Because we have not listened, as creatures of time and space, to the one beyond time and space who made time and space. With God there

is perfect restfulness, and what do we have? Great restlessness. Why? Because we have not listened well to God.

After speaking to Ephraim, God speaks to (the southern kingdom). The false things that they have sought shelter in will be swept away. They will learn this lesson (listen, it is so picturesque!): “Your bed is too short, your blanket too skimpy.” That’s how the CEV puts it. I love that. Isn’t that very similar to what we are talking about with our hurried living? We have gone long on schedules and ended up spiritually short? We have wrapped ourselves in so many activities and found life skimpy?

But right in the middle of all this discourse is a very famous verse. It is the most quoted verse in the NT. Matthew, Mark, Luke, Peter, and Paul quote it. Everyone in the NT (nearly) quotes it, except for John. It goes like this: “Behold, I am laying a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation.” Now let me read the last phrase of that prophecy as rendered by the KJV: “he that believeth shall not make haste.” The one that trusts in the tested cornerstone will not make haste.

Time and again the NT writers pointed to Jesus as that promised foundation stone. Now think about him, His thirty-three years. Hasty? I’m way past 33 years and I’m full of haste. His three years of ministry. I’ve had more than three years of ministry and not a year has gone by where I’ve been without haste.

We’re to be like Jesus. But we’re not like Jesus. Routinely, haste is written all over us ... from speeding down the highway to gulping our food, from

cutting our sleep to getting a DVR on our TV to skip over the commercials, from the Holy Bible to the One-Minute-a-Day Bible. So let's ask, "Where does *our* haste come from?" I'd like to investigate two sources.

First, I suggest that it comes not from the fullness of our lives, but rather from the emptiness of them. It isn't the full lion that is on the move to hunt, but the empty one. It isn't the lion in the zoo whose mind is full of delights that paces, but the one whose mind has too little. When the gas gauge shows empty and I am desperately looking for a gas station on a lonely stretch of highway, guess what? I drive faster. Or does anyone else do this when they play some sport like basketball in which they have little confidence and less skill – you overcompensate with hypermotion? I used to play basketball in seminary on Friday afternoons and I would wear myself out. I tried to make up for my lack of knowledge and skill with crazy motion and effort. The ones who knew what they were doing were measured, economical. Not me. No, it isn't those who are full who have the fullest activity patterns, but those who are empty and especially those who are spiritually empty.

Instead of trusting Jesus for my meaning, I, for example, with my emptiness, create a giant to do list. I will fill myself up with productivity and busyness and prove that I am worthwhile. That is my idol. I will create my meaning and fullness. But I need Jesus and to put my meaning in being his child, his servant.

A second source of our haste has to do with thinking life too long ... *and* thinking life too short. When we think it too long we are in the mindset of

those who go to an estate planner I once knew. He was surprised at how often people say, “If I die, I’d like this and that to happen.” If? Look, one out of one people die. That’s the data. When we move through life thinking it sooo long, we are like shoppers at the grocery store. What are the worst ways to go to the grocery store? Going without a _____ ? (list) And going ____ ? (hungry) So we dawdle through the aisles of our lives like a hungry grocery shopper without a list, grabbing this item and then ending up with a life heaped up, overpriced, and under-nourishing. But the Psalmist says that our lives and days are not like that. He says, “Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” Teach us to have focus on how life is and to have a list that has to do with God.

But, though it sounds contradictory, we simultaneously think about life being too short, and that adds to our haste as well. Life is short, so we grab for all the gusto we can. Quick, get more with both hands before the buzzer goes off! A shopping spree! What was that tv show of many years ago where shoppers went nuts in a grocery store? The guy goes to the New York Strip Steaks. I’m with him. The other person is in the vegetable aisle. I am thinking she is healthy, but she is going to lose the game! But with life too short, we are on a spree. Someone once said to me, a church person, “You know you only go around once.” I thought, “Have you read the Bible???” There is more than this. This is preparatory. How we handle ourselves, our joys and challenges, our gifts and

liabilities – has a bearing on the truer and longer life in God’s nearer presence.

We often say, “I wish I had more time.” But we don’t need more time in our days; we need more eternity in our time. We say, “Now or never,” but Jesus says, “Now *and* forever.” Jesus gives us the time we need. He who trusts, in the stone, in Jesus, will not make haste.

Friends, isn’t it that we are hasting in a hasting world because we do not trust him enough? Does he not tell us that with him there is fullness of life? Does he not tell us that all who are heavy laden may come to him and find rest? Does he not tell us, “and we shall live in the house of the Lord forever?” Does he not tell us better a day in his presence than a thousand elsewhere? Does he not tell us that he comes under the ones who become weary and faint and lifts them on eagles’ wings?

Let us not in the last hours of this year and the first hours of the next year try to make ourselves feel better by burning with activity to fill the year out. We, too often do the burn-the-candle-at-both-ends things, and you know what they say about people who burn the candle at both ends? They are not as bright as they think they are! Let’s not do that. Rather, let us ponder the Christmas message that one who is “Immortal, invisible, God only wise,” one who is “unresting, unchanging, and silent as light,” has come to us in Jesus Christ. He is the stone on which we build solid lives. If we do not stay with him, listen to him, we become empty and frantic and weary. If we do not stay with him, listen to him, we lose our sense of time

and eternity in our days. No, the key to finishing well and starting strong is none other than staying close to Jesus Christ. That's always how you finish well and start strong. The golden hammer of God's grace, the word of the Lord.

If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call.

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see Ann Voscamp's *One Thousand Gifts* re: regrets at hurry. 'I was making up time and throwing away life.'
See also Ted Talk for Radio on "Happy" and hurry robbing us of happy.