

ECCLESIASTES 12:1-8

Remember your Creator in the days of your youth before the time of trouble comes and the years draw near when you will say, "I see no purpose on them." Remember him before the sun and the light of day give place to darkness, before the moon and the stars grow dim and the clouds return with the rain--when the guardians of the house tremble and the strong men stoop, when the women grinding the meal cease work because they are few and those who look through the windows look no longer, when the street doors are shut, when the noise of the mill is low, when the chirping of the sparrow grows faint and the song birds fall silent; when men are afraid of a steep place and the street is full of terrors, when the blossom whitens on the almond tree and the locust's paunch is swollen and caper buds have no more zest.

For man goes to his everlasting home and the mourners go about the streets. Remember him before the silver cord is snapped and the golden bowl is broken, before the pitcher is shattered at the spring and the wheel broken at the well, before the dust returns to the earth as it began and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Emptiness, emptiness, says the Speaker, all is empty.

II CORINTHIANS 4:16-18; 5:1-5

No Wonder we do not lose heart! Though our outward humanity is in decay, yet day by day we are inwardly renewed. Our troubles are slight and short-lived; and their outcome an eternal glory which outweighs them far. Meanwhile our eyes are fixed, not on the things that are seen, but on the things that are unseen: for what is seen passes away; what is unseen is eternal. For we know that if the earthly frame that houses us today should be demolished, we possess a building which God has provided--a house not made by human hands, eternal, and in heaven. In this present body we do indeed groan; we yearn to have our heavenly habitation put on over this one--in the hope that, being thus clothed, we shall not find ourselves naked.

We groan indeed, we who are enclosed within this earthly frame. We are oppressed because we do not want to have the old body stripped off. Rather our desire is to have the new body put on over it, so that our mortal part may be absorbed into life immortal. God himself has shaped us for this very end; and as a pledge of it he has given us the Spirit.

God of life, God of history; you, God, in whom we live, move and have our being, we rejoice in all of the days we are given on this earth. We thank you for the people we know and those who have intersected with us at critical moments and events as our dramas have unfolded. And we thank you for the opportunities you have given us to be that key person in other people's stories. At times it has been fun; at other times agonizing; there have been periods of darkness and we have had enlightenment as well.

As we continue to travel on toward our true destination of oneness with you, we pray that you will keep us open to the many ways you bless us with your presence. When we are tempted to move toward despair or hopelessness, remind us of love. Remind us that we are part of your story and that we have our roles to play and our scripts to say.

And we ask for your healing love to break through in all situations where your creatures great and small suffer. Where there is war, be the Peace. Where there is disaster, be the Rebuilder. Where new ideas seek to emerge, be the Creator. (And we especially remember this morning....) And may we all be the expression of your love in the world.

TEL AVIV

If your life were a novel, what would you entitle it? And what would be its theme? Struggles to attain peace? Childhood memories? Growing up in a highly dysfunctional family? Stories from your working career? A significant relationship that defined your life? A personal tragedy?

Who would be included in your cast of characters? Who were the heroes and heroines who helped you along your way? Who were the antichrists? What were the life changing events as the wheel of fortune stopped on your number? Would the tone be humorous? Perhaps sad? Would it be an adventure or more of a deep and probing exploration of emotions and motives? What would you want your reader to know about you? Where would you begin and how would you end?

It has been said that every true story ends in death. I would think that the opposite is true as well--that every genuine tale begins with birth. It is the in-between where it gets interesting. I was recently listening to an interview on NPR's Fresh Air with Terry Gross whose guest was college professor Meredith Goldsmith. They were discussing some of the great literature in human history, LES MISERABLE, ETHAN FROME, THE SCARLET LETTER, the works of William Shakespeare. One of the points of debate among listeners who called in was whether adolescents could deal with the pathos contained in these writings. Do they have enough life experience to handle the deep conflicts and human darkness that is so painfully portrayed?

We all have novels inside of us because we are all writing our stories as we go along. Stop and consider the multilayers of people and events with whom we have interacted over the years and decades of our existence. Whenever I have contracted with a new counseling client to engage in long term work, I have always begun with a personal history. I want them to tell me their story, to bring in photographs of their family, to explain in as much detail as they can recall what and who shaped their lives and how it is that they arrived at this point? History in

the making. A novel being told.

It is akin to writing a resume. Tedious as they are, the very process of creating such a document can be incredibly empowering. When you list all of your qualifications, education, training, accomplishments and work experience, you stand back in amazement. "Wow! Have I really done all that?"

From a spiritual perspective, there is great value in keeping our resumes updated, to have a sense of our personal history and the story we are living. Because that is not only how we keep a sense of meaning in our lives--whether we are in the early chapters, somewhere in the middle or wondering how we can reach a satisfactory conclusion--but also how we keep a sense of continuity with a broader perspective that includes eternity. And how we experience our lives and the sense of purpose we derive from living them depends upon how we think about life and ourselves within the context of our history.

Metaphorically, our lives are like a Tel--T-E-L. A tel is a mound in the ancient Middle East that was created over centuries as civilizations and cities came and went. When the walls and buildings of a village crumbled or were destroyed by invaders, the practice was to simply build new edifices right on top of the rubble. As time passed, these became like mesas, layers and layers of history with new life built right on top. The word "aviv" in aramaic means "spring." TEL AVIV, then, can be interpreted as *new* or *emerging life*. My point being that no matter where we are in our own personal narratives, the spiritual challenge is always to be building anew on top of our pasts.

We all have our layers of history. We have been through our divorces and relationship changes. We have endured illnesses and chronic physical conditions, periods of depression, deaths of significant others, conflicts with our children or parents, job and career changes. We have had our walls crumble and tasted defeat at the hands of conquerors. What have we learned? How are we applying that wisdom? Where do we want to grow and move on from here?

Our Scriptures for today offer us very contrasting points of view about how to meet this challenge. It would seem that Solomon has succumbed to numbing, existential despair. *Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the time of trouble comes and the years draw near when you will say, 'I see no purpose in them.'...Remember him before the silver cord is snapped and the golden bowl is broken, before the pitcher is shattered at the spring and the wheel broken at the well, before the dust returns to the earth as it began and the spirit returns to God who gave it.*

I do not believe there is an individual here who cannot identify with the feelings being expressed. We have all been there and we have all done it and perhaps we are doing it right now and we understand the urge to give up and say to heck with it. No one would want to read a novel in which those elements were absent because it would not reflect life as we know it and would have nothing to teach us.

The issue is whether we stay there. And that becomes a matter of faith. Do we have a long view or do we have a short view? How does it all fit together? When you are reading a novel, there is always the unknown of where the next chapter is headed. If you knew how it ended, you would lose interest. You have to ford sometimes treacherous streams to get to the other side.

This is the value of having an internal life that is centered in God. Paul comes at this from a very different perspective than Solomon. *Though our outward humanity is in decay, day by day we are inwardly renewed.... our eyes are fixed, not on the things that are seen, but on the things that are unseen; for what is seen passes away; what is unseen is eternal.*

What is at work on the inside? How much do we trust that God is with us? Without trust, we cling to the chapter we're on or we want to return to earlier episodes we recall fondly. But if we start sifting through the strata of our tel, what are we really going to unearth other than fragments of what was, but is no longer?

Paul says that we can be renewed daily in our internal worlds, precisely because they

are unseen. What is seen is here today and gone tomorrow. And that is where Solomon gets stuck--mourning for the golden bowls and silver cords that no longer exist. And he stops writing. That's the end. Nothing to live for. Nothing more to say.

Paul wants us to continue writing, knowing that the Spirit is always available to us. The story is not over until it is over. No matter what chapter you are on, you can keep writing by continuing to contribute. Here is how one spiritual writer puts it: "The primary purpose of your life is to give and receive love...At the end of the day...the questions must be asked: Did you let yourself be loved? Did you love others? What did you learn about love?...The story of your life is supposed to be a love story, not a soap opera. All of the trials and tribulations you face are nothing more than chapters in an ongoing drama designed to teach you more about love."

It is absolutely true that as we age and our physical abilities deteriorate and our mental capacities diminish that our ability to contribute also suffers impairment. Even at the end of her life when she could do virtually nothing for herself with her Parkinson's, my mother was still focused on helping out however she could. She could be cheerful and remained so through her final days. And those who nursed her loved her deeply.

The chapters may not fly off the keyboard as they once did. Perhaps there is not as much drama. Perhaps the drama right now is sucking all of the energy out of you and you wonder how in heaven's name you are ever going to get to a new chapter. It doesn't matter. All that ultimately matters is the love you are expressing as you write your story. May you live in Tel Aviv.

Reverend Thomas Dunlap September 9, 2018