

In the Light of Eternity: Ready, Set...
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1 Corinthians 9:19-27
Revelation 22:1-7, 17-21
John 17:20-26

This may not be your typical introduction to a sermon preached on Mother's Day, but I'm going to assume that some of the moms out there are, like myself, Warrior fans. (Raise your hand, male or female, if you consider yourself a part of Dubnation. And if you aren't, that's ok too ...there's still time to convert!) It's been a phenomenal year, of course. 73 wins in the regular season – unheard of. Even Coach Kerr says, "It's not going to happen again." Such a record is, basically, unbeatable. And now of course, we're in the playoffs and we expect glory.

Clearly (despite last night's game), the Warriors don't make a habit of losing. But sometimes they lose to rather indifferent teams. Like the MN Timberwolves – remember that game? For the Warriors, nothing went right in the first half; their shots were duds; their defense full of holes. In the meantime, the Timberwolves were playing brilliantly. At halftime Warriors forward, Draymond Green, was interviewed. "What's going on?" he was asked. And here's what he said, "*They* came to win. *We* just came." And I wondered: is the same true of the Church?

These two weeks we are taking a look at our lives in this world, set in the light of eternity. The end of Revelation sets the stage for us, as John writes of his vision of heaven – the New Creation. We found last week that we, as Christians, really have two homes: the here-and-now, and our forever-home with God. But we only *reside* here in this world on a temporary basis. Our *citizenship* is in the New Creation where we will spend forever. And the citizenship we have *there* sets our values and priorities *here*.

Today the context is set by Jesus' last words to his people. He says, "I am coming soon." And the response of his people is a hearty, "Come, Lord Jesus." Come, Lord!! It's a shout of anticipation. God's people have always lived in a state of anticipation.

The context of the New Creation makes all the difference. It makes you aware of just how short this life is, in comparison with "forever." It also makes everything we do in this life *more* important – because it will have an impact on eternity. How many people do you know who are far from Christ? It's probably a fair number. Maybe people you see every day at work or at school; maybe people in your own family. Life is short. How will you use it – knowing that Jesus is due to return?

Our readings for today give us some clues. Thinking back to Green's comment about playing to win made me think of the Apostle Paul's reference to winning. Three times in his writings, he compares the Christian life to running a race. In today's reading he says, "If you want to win, you have to focus like an athlete. You need to train. In order to do that, you sacrifice other things. You pummel your body into submission – until you are strong and fit." Paul played to win! But note: this is *not* the race that gets you salvation. That's Jesus' race, and his alone, to run and to win. (Which he did, on the cross.) The race Paul is speaking about is the race to spread the Good News. That's our race, too. And Paul does whatever it takes – whatever it takes – to persuade his hearers: Jews or non-Jews, weak or strong, under the law or not. He frames the message,

speaking their language, so they can get it, and take it to heart. This is Paul's "event." Whoever he's talking to, he will do everything he can so the hearer can hear and receive the message. Paul's like an athlete, who is playing to win.

You need to play smart. You need to focus. You need to be persistent. Jesus has given us the task to tell this world what he, in his great love, has done for them. But we can't just play the game. We need to play to win. Because the opposition is tough. We live in a world that is full of distractions, full of bread and circuses, full of false messages. To return to our analogy, we need a good offense and a good defense. And the Holy Spirit is your coach. He equips you and trains you. You don't do this alone. You are part of a team. Your job is to play with persistence, ready to give your all to the game.

In the light of eternity, this life is short. So first, use it to spread the good news of Jesus, playing to win. Second, consider your bucket list. What do you really desire, I wonder? What do you want to do before you kick the bucket? Here are some of the top 100: travel, go to Australia, climb Everest, have coffee with a stranger, visit all the Harry Potter sites, find the love of your life, ride a camel in the desert. (By the way: having done the last one, I can tell you, it's overrated.) So, what's on your list?

A song was written called, "Live Like You're Dying." If you know you are facing death, how will you use your last days? At first, the song lists sky diving, mountain climbing, riding a bull. (It's a guy, right?) But then other things come into the song: becoming the husband he hadn't been, the friend he would like to have, the son his elderly father needed. He becomes more thoughtful as the song continues. He mentions reading the Good Book; learning to forgive. He finally concludes that "living like you are dying" is itself a gift. When tomorrow is no longer taken for granted, each day becomes special. It's a precious gift, to be used thoughtfully.

The Apostle Paul knew that gift. Toward the end of his life, while in prison, he knew his life hung in the balance. In his letter to the Philippians he describes that balance – not with regret, but with anticipation. Which is better? he wonders. To die and be with Christ, or to live and continue to labor for the Gospel? He is torn between the two. To Paul, whether he lives or dies, his goal is to play on Christ's team. His greatest desire is to be with Jesus, but a close second, for him, is to stay in the race.

Here's another thought: what if you will have all eternity to enjoy the delights of the New Creation? What if you can still go to Australia and climb Mt Everest on that New Earth? What if you have all eternity to enjoy the company of your loved ones? If God made the First Creation in all its wonder, won't the Second be even better? Why would God do any less? My friends: whatever beauty, majesty, diversity and excitement you find in this world, will be even better in the next. What does that do to your bucket list?

Paul had it right. To live is Christ and to die is gain. The guy who wrote "Live Like You're Dying" was on to something. But take it to the next level. Someone once said, "We think that

we are in the land of the living going to the land of the dying, when in reality we are in the land of the dying headed for the land of the living.” Think about that; we are actually in the land of the dying headed for the land of the living. With that in mind, maybe your bucket list now looks something like this: spending your time with someone who does not yet know Christ. Lending a hand to someone who desperately needs to experience love and kindness in this world... in Jesus' name. Serving a meal at City Team. How can you make a difference in someone's life, for Christ? Your bucket list begins to explode with possibilities. I'm reminded of the teacher played by Robin Williams in the movie, "Dead Poets Society." Mr Keating, the teacher, was not so much teaching literature as he was teaching *life* to the boys in his class. He kept saying, "Carpe Diem:" *seize the day*. Make it count. As Christians, in the light of eternity, that thought takes on a new dimension. Make it count, for Christ.

Jesus says, "I am coming soon." That changes things for us. First, play to win. Second, re-think your bucket list, and make it count for Christ. And third, take heart. There's hope.

The message of eternal life is primarily a message of hope. We need hope in this life. Without hope, without something to look forward to, without some form of meaning, you become discouraged; you might even slide into despair. But take heart! Our God is the God of life; he is the God of hope.

When you encounter a crisis in your life, hope means everything. We live in a society that says, "You can do this. You just need to pull up your socks, take a deep breath, suck it up." But there are times when you can't just suck it up. You can't face it on your own. We need one another. We need God. He created you – you cannot live without him. You will not find meaning or hope in your life apart from him.

Crises come into every life. Perhaps it is an accident, the loss of a job, a bad diagnosis. When you face a dead end, God gives hope. Like a small plant that pokes its head through cement cracks, in the least likely places, hope thrives. Perhaps it's not a major crisis but the demands of everyday life that get you down. You're just tired, drained. Perhaps it's been a long week, travel, chronic pain. You have small children or are caring for an elderly parent or spouse whose life has been compromised in some way. You are the 24/7 caregiver. You don't know if you'll be able to make it through the week, much less to eternity. My friend, God gives you hope. I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor who died in a German concentration camp just weeks before the Americans arrived. As he was taken to the gallows, he shivered in the early dawn. Seeing this, one of the guards taunted him. "Are you afraid?" Bonhoeffer looked at him in surprise. He replied, "No; just cold." He knew that in a few moments, he would enter a new life; a far better life. It was the hope of eternal life that gave him (and all of us) strength to continue. The truth that this life is only a flicker in the steady beam of eternity, and the promise that Jesus will come again, gives real hope.

Just this week, I read a devotional that I would like to share with you. It is written by Pastor Al Rogness, former president of Luther Seminary. He says that as very small creatures in a vast

universe, when we cry out, "Who am I?" an answer comes from Scripture. It is as if God himself is addressing us prior to sending us into this world:

My child, out in the seas of space I have an island. I place you there for awhile. You will have longings for the home kingdom, I hope. I want you to visit this colony of mine. Nor is it to be a vacation – nor for that matter, a sentence. I have work for you to do. I want you to transplant some of the justice and truth and love of the home kingdom to that island. The task will not be an easy one. Many of your brothers and sisters already there have forgotten about me and the task I have also given them. They will tell you that it doesn't matter what you do. "Get what you can when you can," they will say. But remember that it does matter, a very great deal, to me. You see, I love that island. Otherwise I should not have created it, and certainly I would not have sent my Son to die to redeem it.

I count on you. I have no one else. I could have sent my angels to do this work, but I send you, my sons and daughters, instead. If you do not work for justice, the earth will never know justice. If you do not love, no one there will know love. If you are not loyal to the truth, all will be error. If you fail me, war and debauchery and crime and boredom will over-run the earth.

I will not leave you alone. I will be with you, even to the end. In my church I will come to you through the Word and the sacraments. Love them and use them. When your tenure on the island is over, I will take you by the hand and lead you across the border, and we will go on together forever.

My friends, time is short. Don't just come to the game. Play to win. Check out your bucket list; make it count for Christ. And take heart: Jesus will come again. It's a promise that gives you hope.