

In our series of messages "Who's afraid of the ...?"



Who's afraid of ... tomorrow?

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne January 4, 2009

Welcome: Happy New Year everyone. There's just something about starting a new calendar that makes you think of possibilities, of changes, and of life changing improvements ... the other people around you could be making. Actually for me today is the start of something very big and new ...

After five years of reading and working, after three years of classes and a couple of years of writing, yesterday (at 1:48 am) I turned in my doctoral dissertation. It's a full 300 pages of well, not the most riveting thing you've ever read, but there, it's done. Which means two things. First and foremost, the day is coming very soon when my daughter will finally be able to call me something new. She chose the name years ago, and once everything is final with my dissertation and oral exam, I will become to my daughter, "Doctor Daddy Dude". Been thinking of having it put on some of my shirts. Ah but better yet, she and I have been talking about what I get to do now that I no longer have to read or write so much. I get to have hobbies again. I can read a book that has nothing to do with developmental psychology. I can do things like I used to ... Feels good.

Yes, starting over fresh gives you a happy feeling. Unfortunately, though the calendars start fresh each year, I have noticed another rather disturbing trend. Even though the year starts new., I find I'm still the same me. Sure, I can make resolutions, but I can't keep them all year. I can start over with the start of the new year, but after a while I need to start over again. Oh well, there's always next New Year's I guess.

Except that I know I don't have to wait a whole year to start over again with God. That's a good thing. Each new day is a chance for me to start anew, to choose to follow God, to choose to trust him with my life. Take today for instance. It's not exactly New Year's Day. Close, but not exactly it. Still I can use today as a starting point, I can make a resolution to trust and follow God today. I may or may not do very well at keeping that resolution all day, but at least I can start by making that choice. You can too. And then whether or not you succeed in keeping it the whole day, you get another chance tomorrow when you wake up to choose again to make the day about God. I'm not a fan of either bumper sticker theology, the one that says today is the first day of the rest of your life. Kind of adds too much pressure for me to handle. And I don't much care for the one that says SSDD: which stands for something like same stuff, different day. No, it doesn't have to be the same. I don't have to be the same as I was. I can choose to let God into my life and choose to follow him. I can choose, today at least, to be God's. And then tomorrow, I can try again. But it all starts with making that first choice today.

As this new year starts, as this new day starts, what will you choose?

Joshua 24 (The Message)

Joshua called together all the tribes of Israel at Shechem ... Then Joshua addressed all the people: "This is what God, the God of Israel, says: "Fear God. Worship him in total commitment. Get rid of the gods your ancestors worshiped on the far side of The River and in Egypt. Worship God. If you decide that it's a bad thing to worship God, then choose a god you'd rather serve—and do it today. Choose one of the gods your ancestors worshiped from the country beyond The River, or one of the gods of the Amorites, on whose land you're now living. But as for me and my family, we'll worship God." The people answered, "We'd never forsake God! Never! We'd never leave God to worship other gods. Count us in: We too are going to worship God. He's our God."

Today

*Today I choose to follow you
Today I choose to give my yes to you
Today I choose to hear your voice and live
Today I choose to follow you
As for me and my house, we will serve you
As for me and my house, we will spend our lives on you ...
Today*

Luke 9:57-62 (The Message)

On the road someone asked if he could go along. "I'll go with you, wherever," he said. Jesus was curt: "Are you ready to rough it? We're not staying in the best inns, you know." Jesus said to another, "Follow me." He said, "Certainly, but first excuse me for a couple of days, please. I have to make arrangements for my father's funeral." Jesus refused. "First things first. Your business is life, not death. And life is urgent: Announce God's kingdom!" Then another said, "I'm ready to follow you, Master, but first excuse me while I get things straightened out at home." Jesus said, "No procrastination. No backward looks. You can't put God's kingdom off till tomorrow. Seize the day."

Reflection: Choosing to follow God takes only a moment. Following through and actually following God is something that takes the rest of the day. It's a life long adventure because it's about how you live, not how you made that one choice. So Jesus tells us to seize the moment, don't lose out on the

opportunity to experience the closeness of God. And then, don't turn back once you've made that choice.

No Turning Back

*Found freedom from my sin, and still the road is narrow
Sometimes I fall and fall to runaway
But I know your grace is strong
And your mercy new each morning
So I'll stay the course until the race is run
Jesus I will follow, follow anywhere you lead, no turning back
Jesus I will follow, follow anywhere you lead
No turning back, no turning back
I've tasted and I've seen that you are like no other
You reached beyond my sin and rescued me
So forgetting what's behind, rememb'ring your great mercy
I choose to run until I win the prize
Jesus I will follow, follow anywhere you lead, no turning back
Jesus I will follow, follow anywhere you lead
No turning back, no turning back*

Intro to message: This morning we're starting a new message series here at The Spirit. Each week in the next month we're going to look at some of those big hairy, scary things that make most of us nervous. You know what I mean ... For instance, what are the biggest worries you have these days? Turn to someone near you and tell them something that worries you. So ... are you worried about your job, or about your fiances? Do you worry about your health? Maybe with all the stress in the air things have become harder in your relationships. Maybe you have kids, and they're always a worry. Today my daughter turns 13. I have another teenager. I now have new worries I didn't have a short while ago.

On the other hand, if you rolled all your fears together into one thing, I'd be willing to bet you could sum them all up by saying what worries you most is simply this: the future. Who knows what the future holds? As you face into the future, you have to face up to the worries of all the things that might be. There's a lot of those. It would be nice to have a personal philosophy that could be cheery about the future, no matter what. Oh, if only when you looked at the future, all you could see were sunny days and happy times. Then no matter what happened, you'd be sure the good times were always only a day away.

Tomorrow

*The sun'll come out tomorrow
Bet your bottom dollar that tomorrow there'll be sun!
Just thinkin' about tomorrow
Clears away the cobwebs, and the sorrow 'til there's none!
When I'm stuck with a day that's gray, and lonely,
I just stick out my chin and grin, and say, Oh!
The sun'll come out tomorrow
So ya gotta hang on 'til tomorrow
Come what may tomorrow! tomorrow!
I love ya tomorrow! You're always a day away!*

Message: Actually you may not have known it but in this song little Annie was just spouting off the trendy philosophy of a previous year. It came to us via a French psychologist and pharmacist named Emile Coue. Coue believed that people should be able to heal themselves if they would repeat to themselves a simple phrase each morning and evening. This form of self-improvement focussed on repeating the phrase, "Every day, in every way, I'm getting better and better." Let's all say that together ... Makes you feel all warm inside, doesn't it? It's kind of the "I think I can, I think I can" school of psychology. If I say this sort of thing I need not be afraid of tomorrow. Instead, I can expect that tomorrow I will be better than I am today, and the day after I will be better still. If I can think it, I can choose it, and if I choose it, I can make it happen. Of course, your results may vary.

Shortly after Coue hit the scene there was an event that brought his ideas into question. It was called the Great War (World War 1 to us) and it was positive proof that every day in every way things were not getting better. Nowadays I don't know a lot of people who believe the future must be better than the present. We've seen too many things go wrong. We've heard about too many possible rare illnesses we could get, and for which we should get tested even if we don't have any of the symptoms. Better catch these things early you know. There are so many new things to worry about. I remember meeting some business folk here at church at a community meeting. One of them was a fast talking, well dressed older fellow who identified himself as a financial planner. He said he could help me make my plans for the future. He asked if I had a retirement plan in place. Then he told me that "If you don't have a million dollars in the bank you simply can't retire." That got me worried, I can tell you. I didn't know there were rules like that. And I really am not sure where I'm supposed to come up with that million dollars, not without a substantial cost of living allowance from the church treasurer. Maybe I should try saying, "I think I can, I think I can."

As you face into the future, you have to face up to the worries of all the things that might be. There's a lot of those.

When you look a bit more closely folks, I don't really think it's the future you and I are scared of anyway. It's something else. It's about being in control, or out of control of your life. When you look to the future, the scary things out there are the things you can't control. I know that because the scary things in the present are those I can't control either. I don't think I'm alone in this. Look at people who are uncomfortable about flying. Maybe some of you here are like that. I don't imagine it would do any good to describe to you the statistics of how it is to travel by air. It probably won't do any good to tell you that you are more likely to be injured on your way to the airport in your car than you are once you are on the plane. None of that matters to people who hate to fly because it's not really the plane that's scary. It's that you don't get to fly it yourself. That fear is about not having control over your own destiny. It's one of the reasons people don't like sitting in a dentist's chair, well, that and

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those drills and shots, or why some of you get nervous about operations. Those are all times when you are no longer in control, and that's a hard thing to accept.

It's something I learned a long time ago. I was chaperoning a youth group trip for 40 teens and things were not going well. The bus we were on was having a very hard time keeping up to speed, we were late for our outing, and even later on the return. Things really bombed out when the bus driver ran out of gas. In the middle of the night. I was a lot younger back then. I worried about making everything happen just right. I must have driven the other chaperones crazy. I paced, I chewed my fingers, I got worried. At one point I turned and looked at one of the parents and said, "I can't believe I've lost control of this whole trip." That sparked a response from the wise parent of three teens who smiled kindly enough at me and said, "Why did you think you were ever in control to start with?" That put me in my place. And folks, it's a good place to be.

You may be afraid of losing control. But who said you were ever really in control anyway? You have the freedom to make all kinds of decisions in your life, but ultimately are you really in control of your destiny? I have come to think of my life as if I were a passenger on a very large ship. I can choose when and what to eat. I can choose how to spend my days. But ultimately I do not get to choose which way the ship travels or how fast it moves through the water. There is a captain who has that all under control for me. He has a crew working to make things happen. They don't take away my free will, but they remind me I'm not in charge and I don't get to have a say about everything. That's a tough lesson to learn. Sometimes it takes a big event in your life to make it sink in. I once saw an interview on Entertainment tonight with Michael J. Fox. This as before he became a political activist, and shortly after he publicly disclosed his Parkinson's Disease. The interviewer asked him how he coped with this fatal diagnosis. He said, "Every day I remember two things. First, there is a God, and second, I'm not him." That interview hit me pretty hard, partly because you don't hear stars talk about God much, but also it came only a couple of years after my diagnosis with a degenerative joint disease. I have tried to remember this each day too ... there is a God, and I'm not him.

I think that statement works a whole lot better than "Every day in every way I am getting better and better." I certainly believe it's better to remember who's really in control of my future. I think it's better to rely on God's help rather than on self-help. After all folks, if we could make everything better all by ourselves, we could have solved all our problems by now.

Let me give you a couple of hints about handling the fear of the future. First, I'd like you to remember something about the future. It's already here. When it comes to faith in God, the future is now. It's easy to get this wrong, and many have over the years, so let me explain. Sometimes in the past the church has taught that God has something good for you in the sweet by and by. Then there will be pie in the sky and we'll all be

happy as can be. And if there is something better waiting for you in the next life, you shouldn't be all that upset by how things are going now. That was the kind of thing told to the black slaves to keep them in their place. Not a good or godly thing. Makes it sound like this life doesn't matter so long as you can get to heaven in the world to come. But that makes God a distant, far off God, as if God was not involved or concerned with the present. If God was only concerned with the next life there would be no reason to ask for healing or help, no reason to have any hope for peace or God's presence now.

God would be a distant reality with no connection to life now. It's no wonder some people have given up on waiting for a God like that. He's not worth waiting for. And he's not real ...

God has promised to be part of this world, he is willing to come and be part of your life right now. That's what Christmas was all about ... that's when God kept his promise to be with us in the here and now. OK,

but that was then, and we live now. What about now? Again, at times the church has got this one wrong. The Bible, for instance, talks about God as past and present and future. That's a way of saying God is timeless, and it sometimes comes through as saying he is "the God who was and is and is to come." Catchy right? Until you get to the last reference in the Bible of God's place in time, this in the book of Revelation. You may recognize these words as part of the famous "Hallelujah chorus" in Handel's Messiah.

Revelation 11:15-17 (from the Message)

The final Angel trumpeted. A crescendo of voices in Heaven sang out, "The kingdom of the world is now the Kingdom of our God and his Messiah! He will rule forever and ever!" Those seated before God on their thrones fell to their knees, worshiped, and sang,

We thank you, O God, Sovereign-Strong,
Who Is and Who Was.

You took your great power and you took over!

Notice what is said of God. His kingdom has come. In Handel's words, "The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ, and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever." But then get the rest of the reading. We are told he is the "God who was and is." That's it. Who "was and is." Unless you read the King James Version of the Bible. This translation at times has a few errors, and this is perhaps the biggest of them all. The translators and copyists were so used to talking about the "God who was and is and is to come," that's what they wrote here. Only the words "is to come" are missing. They are not there. Why? Because he's come. The future is now. And all that's left is for God to give us time to sort things out for ourselves before he calls time and counts up the score.

I tell you this because it changes how you look at today. Christians believe God holds the future in his hands, right now.

"Why did you think you were ever in control to start with?" That put me in my place. And folks, it's a good place to be.

He's god and we are not, and that's a good thing. Give up trying to be in charge of everything and you find there's comfort in knowing God is. Right now, not later. Right now God is in charge of the overall plan of your life and mine. Yes, we still get to make choices. Yes we still have free will. You and I are not puppets on a string that God holds. If you want to choose to follow other gods you can. Or you can choose to let God be god and follow him. Starting here and now. Starting today.

How? Not by saying something funky morning noon and night. Instead let me help you match up some things you do every day with reminders of how you can trust god more with your life, and your future. Because these come from remembering God is ultimately in control.

So start here. (1) How many times a day do you wash your hands? A bunch I'm sure. Get in the habit as you wash up to look at your hands and remember that God has everything in his hands. He has your life, your present, your future, your fears and your joys in his hands. And that's a safe place to be.

I imagine that a number of times a day you eat something. (2) When you eat, pause for a moment and remember God. I'll bet that whatever you are eating will be something you did not plant and grow and harvest on your own, or meat that you did not breed or tend or butcher. Before you eat pause and remember that all you have has been provided by someone else, and that ultimately God provides what you need most in life.

Sooner or later each day you will lie down and go to sleep. (3) When you lie down you have to accept that for a while at least you are not in control. When I worked in a shelter in New York City with bag ladies I learned that's why many of the clients would not take advantage of the beds we had for them upstairs. They preferred to sleep sitting in a chair, with their belongings beside them, even though they were safe in our shelter. To lie down would be to be too far out of control. But each time you and I lie down, we can acknowledge that someone else must be in control when we are not. No wonder it's such a traditional

time to pray ... and ask God to watch over you while you can not do it for yourself. Only, who said you were ever in control anyway?

(4) Then when you get up and before you get going, you can take a moment to choose to follow God's lead. Before your feet hit the floor, you can get down on your knees (figuratively speaking for me and anyone else with bad joints). Take time to remember that each day is a gift from God. Be thankful for it. Use it wisely. Choose to make it a day you live with God and for God first of all.

Finally for most of you, one constant inn each day is that you will get email or phone messages or a text message or two. (5) Each time you hear the friendly little chime on your phone, or you hear, "You've got mail" remember that God is also trying to get through to you, he's trying to get his message through to you too. Sometime each day, for your own sake, not mine, let your email or your cell phone serve as a reminder to talk to God and to listen for him to speak to you. Folks, if you're not praying to God or listening for his response in by regularly reading the Bible you have chosen not to follow God but to choose some other God. Don't fool yourself into thinking you can follow the one real God without talking with him or listening to him. Instead, use the many reminders you have each day ... when you wash your hands or eat, when you go to sleep or get up as reminders that you can find a reason to have hope for the future and not fear, because you can find God close at hand. And because he has always been near to you. It's not like you were ever totally in charge of your life before this, or you will be in control of everything after. There is instead a great sense of comfort that comes from trusting God for all he has done and all he will do ... and it sure beats being afraid of what you can't control. That's why today I ask you to choose God ... and to choose him again tomorrow. It's God that makes things better every day in every way. As long as you have him, what else matters as much?

"He loseth nothing that loseth not God."

-- George Herbert