

Looking Forward

In the name of him who has made us his own, dear friends in Christ: Let me begin with a question for you this morning: What are you looking forward to? What event or coming change for your life that's looming out there on the horizon are you eagerly anticipating? As you think about how you might answer the question, you pretty much need to know the time frame I have in mind, don't you? Are we talking about something short term or long term? Your answer would change if I specified what is it you're looking forward to in the coming week, in the next month, within the year, or in the next few years, wouldn't it? And of course, some things stand out more than others. I've been meeting with a young couple who are planning to get married this summer. There's no question about it: that's their main focus right now. And in my years of ministry I've known several folks nearing the end of this life who, if asked the question, would be happy to say that the only thing they're looking forward to is going home to be with the Lord.

But no matter who you are or what your situation is, there's always something out there to look forward to. I'm sure that our younger members are looking forward to Easter in a couple weeks – and probably not just for its theological significance. It has more to do with egg hunts and baskets full of candy and such. The kids in school are, no doubt, looking forward to their summer break. Farmers are looking forward to warmer weather and the spring planting season (I think it's safe to say we're all looking forward to warmer weather). And there are all those coming milestones like confirmations, graduations, the birth of a child or grandchild ... there's always something to look forward to.

This is true of our spiritual lives as well. That's the main idea being expressed in two of today's Scripture readings. In the passage from Isaiah, we hear the prophet declaring that there's a change coming, that the Lord is about to do something entirely new and different – and that the people of God should be looking forward to it taking place. To usher in the announcement, he recalls certain events of the Exodus. “Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings forth chariot and horse, army and warrior; ... they are extinguished, quenched like a wick.” He's referring to the Red Sea crossing, when the Lord parted the waters so that Israel could pass through safely, and how the pursuing Egyptians in their chariots were destroyed when the path through the sea closed up on them. What the Lord is saying is that this new change that's coming is going to be like that. Israel went from bitter bondage to freedom, from the land of slavery into the wilderness to begin their journey to the Promised Land. He's telling the people whom Isaiah is addressing to anticipate a change as drastic as that.

In the immediate context, he's referring to the end of the period we call the Babylonian Captivity. It was those 70 or so years that the people of Judah were in exile in a foreign land. When Isaiah wrote this, the exile hadn't happened yet. But he wrote it to encourage those who would be taken into captivity. He's telling them not to lose hope. In the same way that the Lord brought Israel out of Egypt, so also he's going to bring Judah out of exile and return them to the Promised Land.

And this is why the Lord tells them, “Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old.” Again, he's referring to the Exodus and the wilderness wanderings, and how every time the people encountered a problem or shortage on the way, they'd all start bellyaching and say, “The Lord has brought us out here to die in the desert! Oh, how we wish

we could have stayed in jolly old Egypt. Life was so easy there. We had it so good.” When asked to trust the Lord to provide and to live by faith in his promises, they’d lose sight of the goal and want to go back to slavery. They’d stop looking forward and turn around and look back. And as a result, many of them perished on the way. The Lord is warning the people who would be taken into exile in advance not to be like that. Keep on trusting the Lord. Keep looking forward to him fulfilling his promise to bring you out of exile. He is going to do it. And he did. Those who kept looking forward, saw it happen. Their exile ended. They were allowed to return home and rebuild their nation in the Promised Land. But not everyone came back. Many lost hope. They gave up on the Lord’s promises and assimilated themselves into Babylon and its pagan ways. They are lost forever because they stopped looking forward.

That’s the immediate fulfillment of the new thing the Lord is doing that Isaiah is talking about – the end of the exile; but there’s another farther reaching story here. You see, the restoration of Judah after the exile – the bringing back to life a whole nation that was dead – is a prophetic foreshadowing of the salvation God planned and promised to bring to his people through his Son Jesus Christ. We’re talking about rescue from sin, death, and the power of the devil through the saving work of Jesus on the cross. That’s the way through the wilderness of this age. That’s the end of our exile. It’s our being made alive in Christ now in time as we come to faith in him, and in eternity when he raises us up on the last day. This is the new thing the Lord accomplished in Jesus, and is even now continuing to do through his ongoing work in the Church. And part of this new thing is that it includes people from all nations. That’s what the reference to wild beasts, jackals, and ostriches honoring the Lord is about in the passage. Those were unclean animals. They are a poetic way of speaking of Gentiles, whom the Jews regarded as unclean. They too are to be incorporated into this new thing the Lord is doing through Jesus – this new people the Lord is restoring to life in Christ.

The Apostle Paul was on hand to see this happen. In fact, he’s called the Apostle to the Gentiles because he was one of the first to understand that the saving message of Jesus was meant for all people – not just for Jews. At the time, a lot of them didn’t understand it. The first Christians who were all Jews, while celebrating the forgiveness of their sins through the once and for all sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, resisted the idea that the Lord opened the way of salvation to all people. They had to have their eyes opened to this new thing the Lord was doing. But many of their fellow Jews couldn’t get over it. They rejected the Gospel message of salvation through faith in Christ precisely because it included Gentiles. They didn’t like losing their special status as God’s exclusive “chosen people”, and so they remained stuck in the past. They stopped looking forward to God’s new and greater work.

And part of the reason for this was they imagined that they were God’s chosen people because they were better than the Gentile nations. “It’s obvious: the Lord picked us because we’re the best. If salvation is open to everyone, if it’s a free gift given by grace through faith in Christ and not based on our works or merit, well, then we’d have to admit that we receive salvation the same way – and that we’re no better than the Gentiles.” And that they could not agree to, so they rejected the Gospel of Christ.

No one would have understood this way of thinking more than Paul himself. Before coming to faith in Christ, he was a self-described Pharisee among the Pharisees. He considered himself the best Jew who ever lived. No one, in his mind, was more scrupulous about keeping the commandments of God; no one more faithful to following the traditions and customs of the rabbis by which they thought they were pleasing the Lord. And this is why Paul was so zealous about persecuting Christians: their beliefs leveled the field. They said all men

are equally sinful – that no one is righteous in the sight of God. It was the most perverse teaching that Paul could imagine because it took away his ground for pride and boasting in himself and his achievements.

But my how he changed when Jesus opened his eyes to the truth. That's what he's writing about in the Epistle: how all that stuff he was once so proud of he now counts as loss and rubbish. "It was keeping me from knowing Christ. It was keeping me from knowing God's limitless grace in Jesus and his blanket forgiveness to all people who receive him by faith." And that, says Paul, is his new goal. That's what he looks forward to: knowing Jesus better every day and being conformed more and more to be like him. And by saying this, he's telling us that's what we should be looking forward to also.

I asked you earlier what you are looking forward to. Now, if I narrowed that a bit and specified what are you looking forward to in a spiritual or religious sense, I'm guessing that all of you would say that you're looking forward to the resurrection on the last day and eternal life in the new heavens and new earth, right? Aren't you? I hope you are. That's when we will know Christ fully and be completely transformed to become like him in love and selfless service. It's going to be more than we can imagine. But that's a long term goal. We don't know when it's going to happen. So what are your more immediate spiritual goals? To what are you looking forward today and tomorrow and next week?

It's important that you have an answer to this question. I mean, if your goal is to make it to the end of the journey, then you ought to be looking forward and moving that way every day. If your goal is to become like Christ completely in the end, then it better be part of your goal to become more like him tomorrow. Or say it another way: if you're not looking forward each day and trusting the Lord to do something new to and with you in the short term, then how can you say you're looking forward to it in the end? If you're not looking forward and taking steps that way, at best you're stagnating, and at worst you're looking back. Either way, you're not going to make it to the goal – no more than would an Israelite with Moses in the wilderness who sat down and refused to budge or one who turned around and went back to Egypt.

This is why Paul is urging us to press on. We can't rest on our laurels. We can't be looking behind us, measuring how far we've come or remembering how faithful we were at some point in the past or what services we might have rendered for the church or for others. That's the sort of thing Paul warns us stands in the way of knowing Christ. Our focus must be forward: learning to know Jesus better; learning to receive from him, through repentance and his word of absolution, the righteousness that comes by faith; that in our lives we might know the power of his resurrection by which God raises us to new and nobler life now in time, conforming us daily to the image of his Son. It's by looking forward always that we are assured that we will make it to the goal, namely the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!