

To Hope for the Mountaintop

Hebrews 11:13-16

The scripture passage for this morning tells some incredible stories of the faith of some major biblical characters. We hear about Noah building the ark. We hear about Abraham waiting and waiting to receive his son. We hear about Moses, departing Egypt and embarking into the Wilderness. These stories are familiar to us because they are not ordinary.

Now, obviously there is quite a bit to these stories that make them stand out to us. These stories talk about apocalyptic floods and hundred year old folk having kids. But, beyond that surface level, these stories have such a great impact on us because of the unbelievable amount of faith that they all shared. And so when we come to the end of the stories, we are told that “All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.” All of these biblical characters were aware of God’s promises, they each caught glimpses of them coming about, but none of them received the promises. They were still living faithfully when they died, and when they died the promises had not been granted to them.

Difficult Aspirations

This is an extremely difficult model to aspire to. How many of us, when asked to be a part of a large project, can maintain a high level of energy for the ultimate goal if we understand from the onset that we will not be around when the project is fully realized? For many of us, if you’re like me, getting to the end of a great deal of work is the only thing that justifies doing any of the work in the first place.

I think we are culturally trained to pick and choose what we devote our time, energy, and resources to based upon the level of satisfaction we might feel when everything is over. It’s always about how it turns out, right? If I had the choice between watching an entire terrible movie or $\frac{3}{4}$ of a great one . . . I would probably choose the bad one. If you can’t see how it turns out, how everything resolves, then what’s the point right?

This feeling comes so naturally to us, I think. Our lives are, for the most part, goal driven. How many of you get absolute joy from making checklists, and then marking things off? Do you sometimes include things on your checklist that you’ve already done, just so you can feel like you’ve accomplished that much more?

Checklist Envy

Before Kara and I were together, I wasn’t really exposed to a lot of country music. To say that that has since changed would be a bit of an understatement. I’ve learned more about country music in the last 18 months of my life than I knew in my first 20 years. One thing I have learned is that the biggest country music artist of the moment is, arguably, a young woman by the name of Taylor Swift. I’m not sure how many country fans are in here this morning, so I won’t assume that you will know what I’m talking about. Taylor Swift just turned 20 years old in December (I had to look it up, I didn’t just know that). Over the last year or two, she’s gone from the newcomer to the frontrunner.

So not that long ago, Kara and I were watching the Country Music Awards on TV. It was getting towards the end of the show and that meant it was time to give out the highest award, Entertainer of the Year. Taylor Swift had already won awards for Music Video of the Year, Album of the Year, and Female Vocalist of the Year. She was nominated for Entertainer of the Year, but faced stiff competition from industry standbys that had longer and more successful careers. Sure enough, though, she won. She made her way up to the podium, obviously overwhelmed with surprise and joy, and then she said something that I haven't been able to let go of. She said "I will never forget this moment, because in this moment, everything that I have ever wanted has just happened to me."

I haven't forgotten that sentence, because as soon as she said it, this wave of envy came over me. I was jealous of the amount that this *20-year-old girl* had already accomplished in her life. Although I have a great many joys and wonderful accomplishments so far, hearing Taylor Swift say that her checklist was finished made me feel like I was behind in the game, like I wasn't doing enough to get what I ultimately wanted out of life.

In so many ways, our happiness, our sense of self worth, and our identities become wrapped up in what we've accomplished . . . so much so that I think we can become very picky about what we invest our time and resources into. If accomplishing things and finishing projects makes us feel good, then we probably will be more hesitant to work as hard for a goal that we don't expect to realize in our lives. It sounds very selfish, doesn't it? I don't think that we do it because we want to be selfish or because we're any more selfish than anyone else . . . it's just sort of become culturally printed on our minds.

Digging Ditches

As many of you already know, I spent 4 summers during college working with students at The Pittsburgh Project. High school and junior high aged youth from all around the country would come to spend 7 days working on homes in the Pittsburgh area. At night, after their full day of work, I would be paired with a small group of 20 or so students, and help them process the work that they were engaged in. There was a homeowner that many of my students were assigned to by the name of Mrs. Ford. Mrs. Ford's main sewer line to her home had been crushed underground, forcing her sewage to back up into her basement. The Project sent teams of students to fix the sewer line.

As I understand it, a sewer line exits a house about 3 or 4 feet underground and then descends deeper to link up to the city line under the street. The pipe was crushed relatively close to the house, so students excavated a hole a few feet deep so the plumber could replace the section of pipe. After this, they discovered the pipe was crushed in another section, closer to the street, deeper in the ground. So students continued to dig holes, excavate dirt. The pipe was crushed in more places still. For 4 weeks, the process endured. After 7 days of digging, one group would leave, and another would arrive.

This was frustrating for students, because they go on mission trips thinking they are going to make great changes in someone's life. But for several groups, *their entire week* was taken up just digging ditches. And when they left, they left behind a crushed sewer line and many deep holes. To Mrs. Ford, their work was invaluable. The process of fixing this pipe was not one that

could be finished in a week, but if no one had started it . . . Mrs. Ford would still have sewage in her basement.

Serving the greater purpose isn't always glorious, but it is absolutely vital for creating lasting and systemic change in a world that *desperately needs it*. We are called to be more thoughtful about our causes. God wants to bless us and we will certainly accomplish a great deal along our own individual paths, but we must be careful about striking a balance that also includes working for the promises that God has made, but we might not see in our lifetimes. Those promises are far more important than any individual goals we might set for ourselves to attain. It is hard to see such far off visions and call them priorities, but that is how they were treated by the biblical heroes we lift up today. Jesus Christ tells us to seek first the kingdom of God. By all means do the work and devote yourself to personal goals and accomplishments. God has richly blessed us with great talent and treasure. But *seek first* the kingdom of God.

To Hope for the Mountaintop

Tomorrow is a day that this country has set aside to honor the life and ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King. When trying to think of someone from contemporary history that embodies faithful devotion to the Kingdom of God, Dr. King is easily one of the first to come to mind. As someone who can only look back on his life through history books, it takes a great deal of effort to grasp the enormity of what he did. He was challenging a system of racial injustice that had existed in this country, in one form or another, for centuries.

I stop and think, what must it have felt like to be one man standing against a force, an ideology that had *endured for 200 years*? Yes, there was a great deal of public support growing against segregation, but were there moments when Dr. King might have thought he would not witness the end of such injustice in this country? Perhaps he felt confident, perhaps he had his doubts, but King placed what the Lord required of him at the forefront of his life.

On April 3rd, 1968, the night before he was killed, Dr. King delivered his final address. His message concluded with him saying "I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

As individuals, we might not see the Kingdom revealed to us. Humanity is on that path, and it may stretch beyond the limits of our lives. *We must fight disappointment. We must push against our selfishness.* We must pursue the promise of God's Kingdom. And if we look and wait, God will lead us up to the mountaintop for a brief glimpse of what the Kingdom might look like. And there is where we will find hope and restoration.

So "Do justly, *now*. Love mercy, *now*. Walk humbly, *now*. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

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