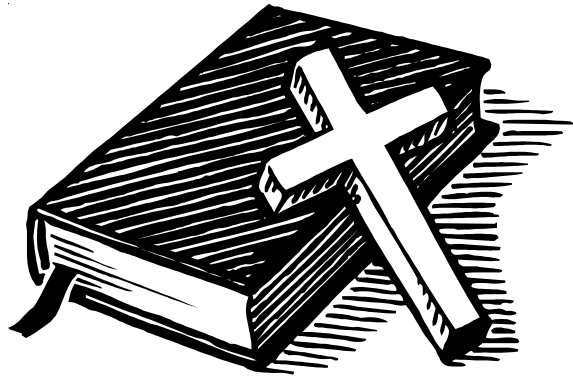


“Perfect Moments”

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; Revelation 21:1-4



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A good meal. A meaningful conversation. A lovely afternoon in the park. A gorgeous sunset. Perfect moments.

That's what a man named Eugene O'Kelly began to seek after he was diagnosed with brain cancer. At age 53, he seemed to be in excellent health, traveling and working long hours as chair and chief executive of a giant accounting firm. At one point in his skyrocketing career, he was so determined to impress a potential client that he tracked down the man's travel schedule and booked the seat next to him on a flight to Australia. He chatted with the guy halfway around the world, landed the account, and then immediately hopped on a flight back to Manhattan. But then a visit to his doctor revealed that he had *glioblastoma multiforme*, an aggressive brain cancer that would likely kill him in 100 days.

Just last week Patty and I received a sad announcement that a pastor colleague here in Portland, Kurt Rizer, died at age 51 from complications of a brain aneurysm." Kurt served as the Pastor of Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church in Beaverton, Oregon. Kurt has been active in the Oregon Faith Roundtable Against Hunger until he discovered the first of his problems just this past summer.

So, what do you do when you receive such devastating news? Eugene O'Kelly said, "I had focused on building and planning for the future. Now I would have to learn the true value of the present." Being a goal-oriented, Type-A high achiever, he decided to write a book about his experience: *Chasing Daylight: How My Forthcoming Death Transformed My Life*. His book gives us some tremendously valuable advice about preparing for the end of our days. He decides to "unwind" relationships with important people in his life, taking the time to have intentionally final conversations with those who have meant a great deal to him.

O'Kelly also goes searching for "Perfect Moments," times of lingering over a fine meal, enjoying a long and deep conversation, taking the time to soak up the beauty of nature over the course of an afternoon. "I marveled at how many Perfect Moments I was having now," he writes in his memoir. Eugene O'Kelly didn't have much time, so he had to get it right. In many ways he did, turning ordinary experiences into Perfect Moments. Then, as *The New York Times* reported, he died just as his doctors predicted.

The end is coming for every one of us, but so often we behave as though we are going to live forever. It may not come today or tomorrow, but someday it will certainly come. So the question for all of us is: What does it mean for us to live with the end in mind, and learn the true value of the present?

Our Christian faith is full of reminders that life has a start and a finish, and it is grounded in the conviction that there is meaning in the movements of our existence from beginning to end. For starters, just look at the life of our Lord. It's only been a few weeks since we celebrated his birth; on the Sunday after Christmas our young adults helped us to reflect on his growing up years; we know he went on to discover his life purpose, how he became an itinerant preacher, proclaiming the kingdom of God; healing the sick and raising the dead. We know, too, how he received the startling news that he would go to Jerusalem and there he would be arrested and charged with treasonous, blasphemous acts against church and state; then how at the young age of 33 he would be executed while some cheered and others cried. Yet he

had fulfilled his life purpose—which was to give himself for the sins of the world, and to offer us the gift of salvation.

The broader stories in this book represent a *purposeful progression* from creation on to a new creation in Christ and our hope of being united with him at the end of the age. God first spoke to us through Old Testament prophets; God spoke to us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; and God continues to speak to us through the gift of the Holy Spirit. For Christians, life is never marked by endless cycles of random events—it always moves from start to finish, in accordance with the Master's Plan.

So what can we say as we turn the corner on a bitter sweet year and begin another season that may be filled with many of the same things? What can we say as we watch the evening news and see the shootings, kidnappings, murders, wars, insurgencies, massacres, terrorist threats and natural disasters as constant headlines? How do you find purposeful progression in a time that seems to be marked by such a cycle of discouraging events? How do you break out of day-to-day despair and catch sight of a Perfect Moment?

For us, as people of faith, the best way to clarify the present is to remember the past and place our hope in God's future. That's just what the Israelites did when they were living as exiles in Babylon roughly 600 years before the birth of Christ. They had been beaten to a pulp by the Babylonian invaders and either left for dead like a road-kill armadillo, or deported in chains to a new and strange land. Those who now survived in Babylon were depressed and discouraged. They felt so bad and sad that the prophet Daniel wondered how he and his people could stay true to God in a place so far removed from the land of Israel, which was their physical and spiritual home. They struggled to find meaning and hope in a time of desperation and despair. Psalm 137 laments, "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:1, 4).

But Daniel discovers hope for the present by focusing on what God had done in the past, and on what God would do in the future. Lying in bed one night, he has a vision of God, the "Ancient One" who takes his place on a throne that

is blazing with fiery flames. God's clothing is as white as snow, the hair on God's head is like pure wool, and a stream of fire flows out from God's presence. The court around God sits in judgment, and the divine record books are opened (Daniel 7:9-10).

This is what we would call an "apocalyptic vision"—an unveiling or revelation of God at the very end of time. As you might expect, God quickly renders judgment on the nations of the world, destroying one and leaving the other powerless (vv. 11-12).

But then Daniel sees "one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven." A human being appears, and to this Son of Man as Daniel calls him, God gives "dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.... and his kingship is one that will never be destroyed" (vv. 13-14). For Daniel, and for all who have faith in the living God, this is a Perfect Moment. And here is the giveaway, takeaway point I want to stress: *God is working to bring order out of chaos and victory out of defeat.*

As the old hymn by Arthur Ainger puts it,

God is working His purpose out
As year succeeds to year;
God is working his purpose out,
And the time is drawing near;
Nearer and nearer draws the time,
The time that shall surely be,
When the earth shall be filled
With the glory of God
As the waters cover the sea.
March we forth in the strength of God,
With the banner of Christ unfurled,
That the light of the glorious Gospel of truth
May shine throughout the world;
Fight we the fight with sorrow and sin
To set their captives free,
That the earth may be filled
With the glory of God
As the waters cover the sea.
All we can do is nothing worth
Unless God blesses the deed;
Vainly we hope for the harvest-tide

Till God gives life to the seed;
Yet near and nearer draws the time,
The time that shall surely be,
When the earth shall be filled
With the glory of God
As the waters cover the sea.

No matter how much horror and tragedy confront us nightly on CBS, CNN, ABC, NBC, the BBC; no matter how Comedy Central's Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show* or Steven Colbert of *The Colbert Report* try to make us laugh a kind of gallows humor about our political and social follies; no matter how many shouting contests are incited by commentators like Rush Limbaugh, Bill O'Reilly, Al Franken, et al. God is working with us, as God did with Daniel, to ensure that God's is done "on earth, as it is in heaven." It's an enterprise that's marching from heaven to earth and from the future to the present. And nothing can stop it. The kingdom of God is at hand.

The exiles in Babylon might not have understood Daniel's son of man to be the Christ that we Christians recognize in this text, the One who will come again at the end of time as "King of kings and Lord of lords;" the rider on a white horse who judges in righteousness and is victorious over every expression of evil (Revelation 19:11-16); "The ruler of the kings of the earth," according to the book of Revelation, "who is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail" (1:4-7).

Whether you were a first-century Christian living under the oppression of the Roman Empire, or whether you are a 21st-century believer feeling overwhelmed by desperation and despair—for each the message has been and is the same: God is not disinterested. The forces of chaos and cruelty may take an occasional battle, but they cannot win the war, because the Lord of heaven and earth is alive and well and is having an ongoing impact on human life. Jesus Christ came to us once long ago, and we believe He will come to us again, to wipe the tears from our eyes and establish a new heaven and a new earth. He will come to show us that Christ desires an everlasting relationship with us, one that cannot be disrupted by mourning or crying or

pain...or even death itself (Revelation 21:1-4). In the end, it's all about relationships: Relationship with Christ and relationship with one another.

Eugene O'Kelly sensed this, which is why in the last hundred days of his life he spent so much time with friends and family and church family. "Must the end of life be the worst part?" he wondered. "Can it be made the best?" This is a good question for each of us, as we face the year ahead. For some of us this may be the last year of life on this earth. This may be all we get. Age or circumstances will spell the end for us. But the question is: can this challenging time be the best of times? Can we remember the promises of the past, learn the true value of the present, and find perfection in the mundane? Can we turn ordinary experiences into Perfect Moments—moments in which we see the hand of God at work?

Near the end of his life, Eugene O'Kelly scheduled times to "unwind" with people who had been important to him over the course of his life. These "unwindings" were intentionally final conversations, held at a house on Lake Tahoe and in a few Manhattan restaurants, in gardens and parks, by rivers, oceans and streams. They were his time to experience friendship, frankness and fun, and he planned each one in order to make it as perfect as possible.

We can do the same. Whether we have brain cancer or not, whether we are having good days or not, we can do our best to have quality times with family members, friends, colleagues and neighbors. We can deepen our relationship with God by spending time in prayer and worship.

We can look to the future with confidence and anticipation, trusting that our Lord is involved in our lives in an active and ongoing way, always working for healing and restoration and peace.

Eugene O'Kelly was a bit chilly and controlling until he began to learn how to live, by learning how to die. He had to learn how to slow down, be present, and live his life one event at a time. What about you? What shifts do you need to make in your life in order to capture the truly priceless moments? If we do things like these, we'll be able to marvel at how many Perfect Moments we can have—not five or ten years from now, but this year, this month, this week, right now.