

Looking Toward the Finish Line

2 Timothy 4:6-8

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (NRSV)

I

I've watched at least two dozen people die, possibly three dozen. Many of those deaths were navigated well, but at least two of them were not.

The first death happened to a young man with AIDS. Back in those long-ago days, getting AIDS was an automatic death sentence because medical science had no way of treating the AIDS virus itself. The best anyone could do was to treat the symptoms and the opportunistic infections, but everyone—doctors, nurses, patients, family, and friends—knew that after a certain point in the progression of the disease, the patient would die.

Call this young man Sam. By the time I knew him, Sam had had the AIDS virus for a number of years, and was now in the latter stages of the disease. Sam was hardly ignorant about AIDS and what it did to the human body, because he himself was a highly trained medical professional. So it was curious for other people at Sam's church to watch the way he dealt with his own inexorable and imminent death: Sam started to spend money like crazy. For the first time in his life, he went to the bank, took out a mortgage, and bought a house. He got himself a dog. He bought new shrubs and flowers for the front yard. He hired contractors to re-engineer and redecorate his house. I think he even bought a new car. The day he died, the renovations to his house were still not finished; his mortgage was still outstanding; and his car payments still had years to go. To others in the congregation, it seemed that in the last year of his life, Sam had embarked on a major campaign to deny the death that was so obviously coming.

The other death that didn't go well happened to an elderly man we'll call Jerry. During one of his last hospitalizations, Jerry was nothing short of an egomaniacal tyrant. Even though he was quite sick, he still had enough mental and physical energy to be a royal pain in the neck. A couple of times an hour, he pressed the help button to summon a nurse. When the nurse came, he ordered demanded water, or a soda, or a pudding, or a Kleenex, or anything else that he selfishly thought might serve his own needs. He treated the nurses as if he were a king and they were his personal servants. At least you could say Jerry's behavior was consistent. Stories abounded about how he had lived this way his whole life. As a businessman, he had treated his employees the same way. As a husband, he had treated his poor, long-suffering wife the same way too. Throughout his life, he was known to be cantankerous, rude, arrogant, and selfish. For Jerry, life had been almost entirely about Jerry. When he finally died, his family and members of his church went to the funeral. But very few friends showed up, mostly because he didn't have any.

II

This is not how Paul died.¹ Both in the letter to the Philippians and also in this letter to Timothy, Paul looks ahead to his own death. We don't know a lot about the particulars of Paul's life at this time, although it seems he was in prison and thought soon he would soon be put to death. Again, we don't know for sure how Paul died, although tradition says that he was put to death by the Roman empire after languishing in a Roman prison. This morning it need not concern us how or when or where Paul died. What does concern us is how Paul thought and felt about the death he knew was coming soon.

Nowhere in the New Testament is there evidence that in his final months of living, Paul poured out his money to buy a Mediterranean villa, a new donkey, or a new set of fancy clothes. He did none of that. As far as anyone can tell, Paul did not dupe himself

¹ A majority of scholars do not think Paul wrote 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, but that these letters were written after his death by his students or colleagues as a way of honoring Paul. The practice of writing things in someone else's name was common in the ancient world and did not raise the sort of legal and ethical issues it would today. However, for the sake of convenience I'll continue to refer to the author of 2 Timothy as "Paul."

into thinking that he could cheat death. Instead he looked death calmly in the eye, accepted its reality, and prepared himself and his friends for its coming.

Nor did Paul use his final years to selfishly prop up his own ego by making life miserable for others. Instead, Paul wanted to die as he had lived, by pouring himself out as a libation. In the ancient world, a libation was a drink offering, usually of wine, that you poured out on top of an altar as an act of worship. It was a gift you gave God, a way of expressing your gratitude and service. In other words, for as long as he's alive, Paul wants to live for God and in service to God. But Paul knows his time is short, and he wants to skillfully navigate the time he has left. He wants to die well.

III

A significant chunk of our congregation is made up of people in the last half of life. The demographics of Berkeley are such that we not only have lots of young children and lots of adults in the first half of life, we also have lots of people who are in the second half of life. Right now, about 50 of us are already retired. And over the next 10 years, almost 60 more of us will retire. Given these numbers, it may be that we will be asking questions about navigating our final decades. The logistical questions about when and how to retire are only the beginning. There are deeper questions such as, What will give my life meaning? What will be the sources of vitality? What will I need, or what do I want, in order to navigate the rest of my life with grace, joy, and gratitude? What will help me to say at the end of my life, with Paul, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith"?

Paul is remarkably cheery about the way he's lived his life. This is not everyone's experience. As people get older and approach their own death, more often they may have profound regrets about the past. Long ago I spent a lot of time with a man in his 70s who had deep regrets about the past. Mostly he was sorry for the way he had treated his wife (who had recently died) and sorry for the endless conflicts he had gotten into with his children. He knew that for decades he had been a difficult person to live with. Underneath everything else, what he wanted was forgiveness—forgiveness from God,

forgiveness from his children, and maybe especially forgiveness from himself. He knew his time was growing short, and that if he was going to address this issue of forgiveness it had to be now while his mind and body were still relatively intact. He wanted to die without regrets.

Another dynamic I've noticed in some people is a yearning to do something different while they still have time to do that different thing. I see this frequently among people in their late 50s and early 60s. For example, I recently talked with a 57-year-old woman who had invested her whole adult life in high school teaching. She was really good at it too. But her soul was disquieted and restless. She wanted more spirituality, more integrity, and more direct involvement in peace and justice work. Finally she articulated the root cause: "I'll soon be 60 years old," she said, "and my time is growing short. What's the one big thing I want to do yet before I get too old or too sick? Is there something else God wants from me?"

I could be wrong, but I think what often drives this is a search for deeper integration. In order to teach high schoolers, this woman had set aside other things she cared about deeply, like advocating for LGBTQ people. The itch she felt for a life change was nudging her toward more personal wholeness, more life integration, and a greater sense of shalom.

Many years ago I knew an insurance agent who was getting restless selling insurance. So in his mid-50s, he decided to become a pastor. This was actually rather feasible, because he had already been to seminary and had in fact already worked as a pastor when he was a young man. Now in the second half of life, the itch came over him. He didn't want to end his career in insurance, but in pastoring. He longed for more vocational vitality, for a different sense of purpose and mission. So that's what he did—he went back into pastoring and finished his career as a highly successful pastor in a flourishing urban congregation.

The witness of 2 Timothy is that Paul arrived at the end of his life feeling remarkably optimistic about dying. He has done the best he could to serve Christ. Yes, sometimes it was hard and stressful and even painful, but he did his best. Maybe he had been vocationally successful or maybe he hadn't, but he did his best. Other people had sometimes admired him and sometimes criticized him, but he did his best. The finish line was in sight, and Paul felt confident that he had done his best for God.

The finish line lies ahead for all of us. What one thing would you like to do yet before you get there? It may be big or small. It may be hard or easy. What one thing will help you say, "I did my best"?