

“Make It Count”

Ecclesiastes 12:1-7 ¹

Well, here we are on the first Lord’s Day of 2020 and the first Lord’s Day of a new decade. This is going to be a wonderful and momentous year!

As we’ve noted already this morning, because of the two kinds of cancer that have overtaken me, 2020 will be our last year together as pastor and people; but this is not going to be a year of marking time. Our Pastor Search Team is now commissioned, and they’ll begin work in earnest next Sunday. Our Church Council will begin deploying our new Strategic Plan, based on our Natural Church Development survey, next Saturday. We have lots to do!

At the same time, as I point out at the turn of every year, some of us here this morning will likely Cross Over into the Presence of God in 2020 . . . and not necessarily the oldest of us. Quite a few of us will Cross Over before the beginning of another decade, and I may be in that number, myself. It’s important to take note of these realities. But it’s also important to press on with Vigor, with Purpose, and with Joy until God’s Trumpet sounds.

If the Lord allows, at this time next year, I’ll be retired from forty-plus years of full-time ministry. I’ll have a lot to do at first, getting our housing situation transitioned to Virginia, but after a while it will be time to wonder what’s Next? When I think about that, I think about my Dad.

My father retired from the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1981 at the age of 69. After he retired, he helped to start two churches in Michigan, went on mission trips to Alaska, China, and Upper Volta, delivered Meals on Wheels every week for fifteen years, and volunteered weekly at the VA hospital for twenty years. And so, as I follow in his footsteps, while I may not be pastoring a church or preaching every Sunday, I hope to be meaningfully involved in Kingdom Work so long as my health allows me to do that.

Some of you may know Leonard Pitts. Leonard is a newspaper columnist in Miami, and our paper in Bristol carried his columns. I like what Leonard writes, and I’m reminded of something he wrote some years ago when Bill Gates announced his retirement from Microsoft in order to give full time to giving money away through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Since Bill Gates was at that point the richest person in the world, the news that he intended to focus on giving his money away was no small announcement.

As Leonard reflected on this news, he wrote, “If life’s first act is about growing up, coming of age, learning the lessons that shape you, and the second is about acquiring things, getting ahead, building a career, shouldn’t the third be about something bigger than one’s own aspirations and comforts?

“Shouldn’t it be about doing something, leaving something, creating something that makes life better for somebody else? Yeah, I think it should. . . . I can’t write a billion-dollar check. But I can paint a fence, mentor a child, maybe even endow a small scholarship. Bill Gates has me thinking with fresh energy about those and other things I can do—the responsibility I have—to change my corner of the world.”² That’s what I hope to be able to continue doing in whatever corner of the world I find myself next, and that’s what I hope you’ll continue to be about right here in Oakland Mills.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on January 5, 2020.

² Leonard Pitts, “Bill Gates’ Example Has Me Thinking About the Rest of My Life,” *Bristol Herald-Courier*, June 24, 2006, A6.

And so it is that our Journey through the Bible brings us this morning to the book of Ecclesiastes. We've already read the text from Ecclesiastes 12:1-7, and, while I'm not going to read that again at this point, I do want to direct your attention to those verses.

Scholars differ on their interpretation of particular words in this passage, but taken together, these verses give a graphic and elegant description of the changes that take place as we get older. Such thoughts are not unique to Ecclesiastes, of course. Here are two other similar meditations. The first is from Shakespeare, the second from the poet, Charles Kingsley:

His big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion;
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.³

That was Shakespeare. Here's Kingsley:

When all the world is young, lad,
And all the trees are green;
And every goose a swan, lad,
And every lass a queen:
Then hey for boot and horse, lad,
And round the world away;
Young blood must have its course, lad,
And every dog his day.

When all the world is old, lad,
And all the trees are brown;
And all the sport is stale, lad,
And all the wheels run down;
Creep home, and take your place there,
The spent and maimed among:
God grant you find one face there,
You loved when all was young.⁴

A more familiar treatment of this idea is Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*,⁵ in which Ebenezer Scrooge meets the "Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come," and through it comes face to face with his own miserable death. The outcome of his encounter is a transformed life filled with charity and joy in place of meanness and miserliness.

The terrifying prospect of a lonely and loveless death becomes both Scrooge's undoing and his transformation. That's the same thing the writer of Ecclesiastes was trying to do for his reader(s) in our text. Or, to put this idea in one verse, the psalmist wrote, *Teach us to make the most of our time, so that we may grow in wisdom* (Psalm 90:12).

Pastors occasionally get free books in the mail, and they're usually worth what they cost. One of those books some years ago was by someone named Kirk Nowery, and while the book wasn't that great, the title was intriguing: *The Stewardship of Life: Making the Most of All that You*

³ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 2.7 (1623).

⁴ Charles Kingsley, *The Water Babies* (1863), chapter 2.

⁵ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (1843).

Have and All that You Are.⁶ As I'm sure you know, to be a steward is to have fiduciary responsibility for something that belongs to someone else. Most of the time we think of stewardship in terms of money. Nowery's book talks about the stewardship of life, which is, of course, our situation in relation to God, and that's what Ecclesiastes is talking about, too.

Some of you may know that Bob Pierce was the founder of both *World Vision* and *Samaritan's Purse*. Bob's life prayer was, "**May my heart break for those things that break the heart of God,**" and that reminds me of the words of a hymn by Bryan Leech:

Let your heart be broken for a world in need
Feed the mouths that hunger, soothe the wounds that bleed,
Give the cup of water and the loaf of bread
Be the hands of Jesus, serving in His stead.

Add to your believing deeds that prove it true
Knowing Christ as Savior, make Him Master, too;
Follow in His footsteps, go where He has trod,
In the world's great trouble risk yourself for God.⁷

Let me read that one more time: "**Add to your believing deeds that prove it true. Knowing Christ as Savior, make Him Master, too. Follow in His footsteps, go where He has trod. In the world's great trouble, risk yourself for God.**"

As we think about the year ahead and the years ahead, you and I have many opportunities to do unusual things, risky things, and most of them are probably foolish. So how can we avoid being foolish and unwise, understanding what God's will is and making the most of God-given opportunities?

A number of years ago, I heard Mary Cosby speak at Broadway Baptist Church in Ft. Worth, where Jill and I were members. Mary and her husband, Gordon, founded the famous Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., and what she said that night changed my life.

Mary was talking about this very question—about understanding what God's will is and making the most of God-given opportunities—and she identified four signs that guide us to understanding the will of God for the next step of our faith journey. We're very seldom given guidance about anything but the very next step; and the four signs are these:

1. The will of God for the next stage of the journey is **SIMPLE**. You could probably state it in one sentence.
2. The will of God for the next stage of the journey is **IMPOSSIBLE**. From where you are, you can see no way in the world to accomplish this mission.
3. The will of God for the next stage of the journey is **PERSISTENT**. It will simply not go away. No matter how much you try to ignore it, it comes back again and again.
4. The will of God for the next stage of the journey is **NOT AN EGO-TRIP** . . . but it will be a mission that allows you to sense God's pleasure and enjoy God's blessing as you joyfully participate in God's purposes for our time.

⁶ Kirk Nowery, *The Stewardship of Life: Making the Most of All that You Have and All that You Are* (Camarillo, CA: Spire Resources, 2004).

⁷ Bryan Leech, "Let Your Heart Be Broken," to the tune WYE VALLEY.

Simple. Impossible. Persistent. Not an Ego-Trip. “Simple, impossible, and persistent” testifies to the witness of God’s Spirit. “Not an Ego-Trip” protects against the Root Sin of pride. When these line up with God’s Word and the Opportunity God provides, then the time has come to break camp and risk our lives and our goods to an unseen path that leads us *confidently forward to a city with eternal foundations, a city designed and built by God* (Hebrews 11:10).

Now that all sounds pretty good, but launching out in faith feels pretty different when the call actually comes, doesn’t it? I’ve noticed that as the years go by it seems easier and easier to settle for safety and security, not expecting very much from God, and not wanting God to expect very much from me. Have you noticed this?

Almost without noticing it, we can slip into an attitude of complacency and nostalgia that desires nothing more than for nothing much to change until we can check out and graduate to glory. But do you remember how old Abram was when the call came to move out? He was seventy-five!

No matter how old we are, God calls us to live out on the end of the rope, out on the cutting edge, out on the end of the limb, out on the boundary where the Kingdom is being born, where lives are being transformed. And it seems to me that if you and I are really going to live as Great Commission Christians, we’re going to have to do whatever it takes to love people—not as means to our ends, but as ends in themselves, because God loves them.

The question of the stewardship of life’s opportunities asks us whether we’re willing to be uncomfortable, to stretch into new ways of following Jesus so that others can know Him. I submit to you that to do that which simply makes us comfortable is to be unfaithful to the Gospel.

As *The Lord of the Rings* reminded us, stories are never passed down from generation to generation about those who chose the easy way, the known way, the safe way. That’s why Paul, intrepid adventurer that he was, cautioned us to “*Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is*” (Ephesians 5:15-17).

So here’s the question: Are you, are we, doing anything that is God-sized? Are we pursuing any goals that we know cannot be accomplished unless God helps us? Is there any evidence that God has shown or is showing us what God is about to do where we are? I think we are, and I think there is.

For starters, through Pastor Andrew’s ministry and leadership, we’ve been able to baptize ELEVEN teenagers in 2019, most of them young men. That. Is. Amazing. We are pulling together in new and exciting ways to help this happen, but we need to continually remind ourselves that Pastor Andrew is the Coach of this team, not the team itself. We’re the team, and each one of us has a part to play. Have you got your jersey on?

A second thing that I see happening is babies and young children everywhere! This is beautiful! This is wonderful! Many of us can remember our situation just a few years ago when we had no babies, no children, and few youth. God is at work!

I love having babies in worship. But do you know what? These young parents need encouragement. It takes a LOT of effort to get a young family to church, and these weary parents need to be able to worship without worrying about their little ones in the service. We need some folks who will take care of those little ones, either in this room or in another room, so those parents can worship. As another hymn puts it,

Because love has been lavished so upon me, Lord,

A wealth I know that was not meant for me to hoard,
I shall give love to those in need, shall show that love by word and deed:
Thus shall my thanks be thanks indeed.⁸

We can do this.

Simple. Impossible. Persistent. Not an ego-trip. There's something else that's stuck in my mind that fulfills these characteristics, and here's what it is: *God is calling CBF to become the catalyst that transforms Oakland Mills into a community that others wish to replicate.* Let me say that again . . . why don't you read it with me:

**God is calling CBF to become the catalyst
that transforms Oakland Mills into a community
that others wish to replicate.**

I don't know all that means, but I'm pretty sure we can't accomplish this if God doesn't help us. This is a Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal (BHAG) that is worthy of all we have and all we can give. This is a goal that pushes back the Darkness. This is a goal that transforms the world. This is a goal that fulfills the Great Commission. Are you up for it?

Joann Fezell was our Minister of Music in Bristol for forty-five years, and she was also our organist, playing a gigantic pipe organ as she directed the choir. When we were planning Joann's memorial service, many people insisted that the hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," be a part of that service, because they remembered how Joann always wept at the organ as she played that hymn. You know the words:

When I survey the wondrous cross,
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ, my God;
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.⁹

It's 2020, friends. We've got work to do. Let's roll.

⁸ Grace Noll Crowell and Phillip Landgrave, *Because I Have Been Given Much*.

⁹ Isaac Watts and Lowell Mason, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*.