



January 2, 2011
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It's About Time God Finished Up Philippians 2:5-11

Since this is kind of a special day, the first Sunday of the New year, I thought we might mix things up a bit in our order of worship. This morning, I'd like us to begin our sermon time here, before we sing Christmas carols for the last time until next Christmas; a little later we'll pick the sermon up again. The sermon today is about "last things"-- about where things will finish up for you and me and all of creation. I don't mean where we'll end up when we leave church and go home, I mean where things will *really* end up for us and everyone and for the whole world.

Where things end matters—maybe more than we tend to think. Let me show you what I mean. Imagine that someone rushes up to you and says, "How do I get there?" What would you say? "Uhhh, how do you get *where*?" They say, "You know, *there*! How do I *get* there!? Do I go this way or that way? Do I go left or right or straight, or up or down or *what*?"

Here's the deal: we can't tell which way to go unless we know where we are going, can we? When we know where we're going, where we'll end up, *then* we'll be able to understand the directions for getting there. What good is the GPS in your car if you don't know where you're trying to go? Without entering your destination, you won't be hearing any courteous voice telling you to turn left in 300 feet, will you? So, where are we Christians trying to get, and how do we get there from here? Or, to ask it more carefully: where is *God* trying to get us to be in the end? And, if we know the answer to that, won't we have a way better idea about what we ought to be doing today and all this year?

One of the wonderful things about Christmas carols is that they tend to tell us where we are going—where and how things will be when God finishes up. In just a moment we're going to sing three carols, and every one of them points us to where God is working to bring us, and to bring the whole of creation—and all three of them urge us to live now so that we wind up there then. To put it another way: these carols tell us *why* Jesus came—what it is he came to make possible. So, as we sing, please watch for two things in the words: (1) where we and everything will wind up, and (2) what we ought to do now in order to wind up there by his grace.

[We sing "Joy to the World" verses 1, 3 & 4; "Once in Royal David's City" verses 1, 2 or 3, and 4 & 5; and "Away in a Manger" verses 1 & 4. Song lyrics listed below sermon notes.]

Okay, let's just check what we heard. Shout out. We'll look at "Away in a Manger" in a few minutes, after our scripture reading.

Read Philippians 2: 5-11

Our sermon series has been "It's About Time" We've said, it's about time God spoke up and showed up. It's about time for peace, and about Time God Straightened (us) Up. And today, It's about Time God *Finished* Up. So, what does Paul say is the "finish line" for God? God's finish line is this: to unite everything under the Lordship of Christ—every knee will bow and acknowledge that Jesus is Lord. That's where everything finishes up.

God is going to take this fractured world, in which everyone has their own opinions about everything, their own ideas about how to live, and make it one under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. God means it. There won't be any more negotiating, no second guessing, no "healthy exchange" of ideas and values between us and God about it. "At the name of Jesus, every knee in heaven and on earth will bow and every tongue confess—that means "agree"—that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Jesus is Lord—he is the boss, the One who calls the shots, who "gets to say so." And one day, on "that day," what the Bible calls the "Day of the Lord," every creature in heaven and on earth who is living or who has ever lived will bow before him and agree that he is in charge, like it or not: you, me, your neighbor, kings and presidents, the rich and the poor, the famous and the nobodies, crooks and good guys, angels and demons (including Satan)—every knee in heaven and earth is going to bow and acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus of Nazareth, the Only Son come from the Father. The ancient battle between God and Satan that has raged across both heaven and earth for ages will be over; sin will be no more; the creation will be restored to what God intended it to be when he made through Christ the Eternal Son—no more will sins and sorrows grow, no more will thorns infest the ground (as we sing in "Joy to the World"). And God is going to unite all things, every thing, everyone, every where, every when, under the Lordship of Christ. That's how God is going to finish up.

Now, once we know where things are going to wind up, we begin to have a pretty good idea of how we ought to be living today, don't you think? If we're going to wind up in heaven doing things Jesus' way, with him being the boss of me (as kids sometimes like to put it) maybe I ought to begin to get to know Jesus *now* and begin to get used to doing things his way today. As the lovely Christmas carol says, "Be near me Lord Jesus, I ask Thee to stay, close by me forever and love me I pray; Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care, and fit us for heaven to live with Thee there." "Fit us for heaven" means "get us ready *now* for heaven"—a really good idea. Of course, if I just hate the idea that Jesus will be in charge of everything for eternity, then maybe I'd better hurry up and I do all the things I like that he doesn't like before I die. Hmm, more than that, if I hate having Jesus in charge today, how do you think I'm going to do in heaven?! Won't I be likely to hate being in heaven where everything is done Jesus' way? Our culture's view that everyone is going to heaven is a very odd one, I think: I know lots of people who don't like God and really, really

don't like doing things God's way. They don't want to be in God's heaven, they want to be in a heaven where *their* will is done, where *their* dreams come true, not God's. It's funny, in a tragic kind of way: we don't get to decide whether there's a heaven or not because we can't make there be a heaven—and we don't get to determine what heaven will be like, because the *God* who created heaven gets to decide that. There is nothing we can do to change that: in heaven everything will be done God's way in Christ. Where you end up tells you a lot about what to do now.

Think about it a bit, please. When Jesus talked about the "Last Days" what was his most urgent message? It was always: "Be ready." Jesus said he would come again to judge the earth and to take his people to himself—but he said he would come the way a thief in the night comes. Why do we lock our doors every night? Why don't we leave them unlocked *except* on the nights we think we might be robbed? Because you never know. Jesus said, "Well, that's the way it will be when I come again. So, since you don't know when I'm coming, whether today, tomorrow, or a thousand years from now, you'd better be ready all the time, every day, and in the middle of the night, too."

Let's bring all this down to earth a bit. Several Sundays ago, I went to Costco after worship, and ran into half of Chapel Hill shopping and eating pizza and hot dogs at the cheapest eating establishment in town. Pastor Jeremy, Diane, and their three wonderful kids were there, too. As we were chatting each other up, one of their beautiful children said, "Mom, I don't want to eat the rest of my hot dog." "That's okay," Diane said, without missing a beat, and with no edge at all in her sweet voice. "You don't have to eat the rest of it. But there won't be any ice cream for you when the rest of us get some after lunch." Without a word, the rest of that hot dog disappeared. Now, this may sound like a commercial for "Parenting with Love and Logic"—and if you haven't taken that workshop, then make sure you don't miss it the next time we offer it—but it's not. It's an illustration of something that parents and grandparents ought to be doing with their children in light of heaven—in light of the reality that one day every knee will bow and agree that Jesus is the boss of me. If Jesus is Lord, then it's crucial that we learn to submit to his authority. He saves us by *being* our Lord. There are things we can never know about God without being obedient; there are things we can't know about how to live without letting Jesus teach us how to live—without submitting to his authority. And if we are going to raise children who are followers of Jesus, we *have* to give them practice being obedient, the way Diane did. She required her child to be obedient to her—she did it with consummate skill and grace, but the truth is that she was the one who was in charge, who got to "say so" about who got ice cream and who didn't. Children who don't learn to obey their parents will have a tough time learning to obey Jesus. And, of course, children whose parents are unskillful tyrants will have a really hard time learning to obey Jesus who was never unskilled nor a tyrant—but he was always very clear.

Children—and grown-ups—love to say, "You aren't the boss of me." Well, then, who *is*? Are *you* the boss of you? Western civilization thinks you ought to be—and we praise people who "think for themselves" instead of letting anyone, especially any authority figure, tell them what to think or believe. So, are *you* the ultimate decider of what is good and bad, what gives life and what steals it—of whether to eat hot dogs

or ice cream for lunch? If so, then maybe God oughta check in with you once in awhile to make sure Jesus is running things right? One of us has to change—Jesus or me—guess who it's going to be? If children don't learn to do it because you said so, how will they learn to submit to any authority, even to Jesus' authority?

Now, of course, kids learn best by what they see their parents do—by how we live and what our homes are like. So, here's a question for us: Can your kids, your grandkids, tell that Jesus is the boss of you? Honestly, if we asked your family, "When was the last time something was decided in your family by saying, "We're gonna do it this way because Jesus said to," would anyone be able to tell us anything that matters? If you asked your kids, would they be able to tell you what's different about your family's values and behaviors from those of their pleasant, civilized middle class families they know? Any difference in what you do with money and possessions? The way you live, deal with conflict, play? Any difference in how you court, deal with love and anger and forgiveness? Any difference in the language you use, the people whose opinions matter to you?

If uniting everything under the Lordship of Jesus Christ isn't where things are *really* going to end up, if that's not real, then let me ask this: what *do* you believe about the finish line—about the ultimate destiny of things—including you and the people you love? What are you saying to yourself about life and death and life after death? What do you say to your children, and friends? And, what are you hearing from our culture about last, ultimate, things? I want to lift up two things that I am hearing more and more in America about these things. Maybe you've heard some of these things, too.

More and more across the last 10 years I've been hearing things like this, "As long as we remember her or him, he'll live on, she'll stay alive." It's sweet in a way. But if you dig into it a bit, you begin to wonder how much hope and meaning there is in that thought. If people live on after death as long as we remember them, then . . . what if I wasn't a very memorable guy? And, just how certain is my existence after death—and who does it depend on, and how much confidence should I have that they will really keep me alive after I die? If being remembered by others is the key to my afterlife, then that tells me what to do before I die: I'd better work hard to be remembered! One way to do that is to die a very memorable death—and sometimes I wonder if that isn't part of what's going on with the mystique of suicide among some young adults. After all, not many people are remembered as thoroughly as Kurt Cobain, the rock great who took his life.

So, let's be careful, here. I'm not saying that suicide is an unforgivable sin—it is not. What I am saying, though, is that life after death does *not* depend on whether other human beings remember me. Praise God that that isn't the case. It depends on God's love and grace—God who created the universe through the Son, who came in Jesus, who was raised from the dead; Jesus who has gone to heaven to prepare a place for me when I die. Who in this world can promise any of that? No one.

There is another, very tender, thing I am hearing more and more of at memorial services over the last decade, sometimes even from Christians. It goes something like this, "I know that Your mom/dad/gramma/grampa is looking down on you from

heaven, watching over you. If you need help, you can call on him or her.” This is really sacred ground, I know, so I want to be as careful and gentle as I can be. But, beloved, is that really and truly the way things are? What scriptural witness is there to support these sweet thoughts? Are our loved ones who have died the ones to whom we turn for help and hope and comfort and peace? Is that what we want to teach our children? Do our loved ones become like gods when they go to heaven, and do they really watch over us (does scripture say that anywhere at all?); do they have powers—supernatural powers—to help us, to protect us and to fix things for us? Honestly, when we make gods or goddesses out of created things, isn’t that what the Bible calls idolatry? Please be careful what you say to comfort your children—and each other. We want our children to turn to Jesus, not to the loved one they have lost. We want them to pray, with the Christmas carol: “Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay, close by me forever and love me I pray.” Will they truly be better off with an Americanized version of ancestor worship than with Jesus? Our loved ones’ eternal destinies are secured by what God has done in Jesus Christ; there is no substitute for Jesus. Tell the stories of Jesus—of him preparing a place for us in heaven so that we know our loved one is safe and okay; tell them about Jesus wiping away every tear from our eyes, and about being in a place where everything is right and good and beautiful because it is where Jesus is. Tell them that because of Jesus, we will see our loved ones again in heaven.

Sometimes when I am a bit fed up with life, I cry out with the early church, “Maranatha—come quickly Lord Jesus. Or, as our sermon title has it: “It’s about time you finished up, God.” But most of the time, I treasure life here, look forward to the absolute certainty of being with God for eternity, and seek the Spirit’s help to live Jesus’ way in Jesus’ world until one day I see him in heaven, and bow my knee—my whole self—to the ground lost in wonder, love and praise.

O Lord, fit us to heaven to live with thee there. The Lord is with us. Amen.

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Read: Have someone read Philippians 2: 5-13 out loud, and then someone else read it out loud again; even though it's familiar, take time with it because it's quite remarkable.

Individual Reflection: Take at least 5 minutes to reflect personally on two questions that are like two sides of the same coin--our Philippian passage ought to help.

(1) What is God's mission in Christ? Write a sentence or phrase about that--what is God up to with you, all of humanity, the world? What scripture passages come to mind to support what you've said?

(2) What is God's ultimate purpose for creation--the end to which He is bringing it and you?

Reflect Together: Share your thoughts with each other on the two questions. Then reflect together on this question: if that's God's mission, if that's what God will do in the end. Then how should we live today--what should **I** be doing; and, how should **the church** live today--what should we be doing together, what should the world see when they look at us?

SONG LYRICS

Joy to the World

Hymn 125...1,3,4

Joy to the world! The Lord is come
Let earth receive her King
Let every heart prepare Him room
And heaven and nature sing, and heaven and nature sing
And heaven, and heaven and nature sing

No more let sins and sorrows grow
Nor thorns infest the ground
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found
Far as the curse is found
Far as, far as the curse is found

He rules the world with truth and grace
And makes the nations prove

The glories of His righteousness
And wonders of His love, and wonders of His love
And wonders, wonders of His love
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Once in Royal David's City
(Hymn 155...see stanzas below)

Once in royal David's City
Stood a lowly cattle shed
Where a mother laid her baby
In a manger for His bed
Mary was that mother mild
Jesus Christ her little child

He came down to earth from heaven
Who is God and Lord of all
And His shelter was a stable
And His cradle was a stall
With the poor, oppressed and lowly
Live on earth our Savior holy

And our eyes at last shall see Him
Through His own redeeming love
For that Child so dear and gentle
Is our Lord in heaven above
And He leads His children on
To the place where He is gone

Not in that poor lowly stable
With the oxen standing by
But in heaven we shall see him
Set at God's right hand on high
Where like stars, his children crowned
All in white shall gather 'round
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Away in a Manger
(Hymn 128...1,2,3)

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed
The little Lord Jesus laid down His sweet head
The stars in the sky looked down where He lay
The little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay

The cattle are lowing, the Baby awakes
But little Lord Jesus no crying he makes
I love Thee, Lord Jesus, look down from the sky
And stay by my cradle till morning is nigh

Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask Thee to stay
Close by me forever, and love me, I pray
Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care
And fit us for heaven, to live with Thee there

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