

SERMON TITLE- "Life Isn't A Still Frame"

TEXT- Psalm 4

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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Needless to say this past year will probably stand out as one in which the variety and intensity of the challenges we faced was particularly high. Today as we beginning 2009 I want us to stop and both look back and forward and reflect. That is the blessing of a day set aside by God- a day which is deliberately focused, not on our own agendas but on an eternal perspective.

I want to take you to a story I came across as Janet and I were driving to Victoria on Monday for radiation. While we drove I heard a story on the radio that really caught my attention. It is the story of the picture below.



The picture was taken by an embedded photographer, Warren Zin in March 03. It is US Army medic Joseph Dwyer carrying a wounded Iraqi boy to safety. Immediately the Zin knew he had a once in a life time picture and sure enough within 24 hours of having his picture taken and it being put on the front page of USA Today, Dwyer was famous. The picture captured something powerful around the world.

There are pictures that do that and every artist lives to capture such moments. That is not just the challenge of photographers- it is the challenge of preachers, musicians, writers, poets, painters, sculptors etc.

But the radio story only began with the picture- it then moved to what happened to Joseph Dwyer. His story was tragic. Within a few months of the picture be taken he was back home but even though he was a hero the after effects of the war haunted him. This year in June he died a broken drug addicted man. In this he was not unusual. War and trauma kills people long after the battles are done.

What made Joseph Dwyer different was that famous, heroic picture. It was a picture that identified at a particularly captivating moment in time. If he had been the picture the story would not have been so heartbreaking.

The problem is-

Life Is NOT A Snap-shot

The snap-shot is very powerful because it freezes a moment in time. Those who watch sports on TV know about the power that technology has given us to freeze moments in time. When a great goal is scores [or a big hit is made in hockey] the camera allows us to stop that moment and analyze it in extreme detail. It is something we love to do and TV sports would be much poorer without it.



But real life doesn't freeze- it keeps moving on.

What struck me about the story was that it captured a problem that all of us face, especially when we are in the middle of big things.

What happens when big things roll through our lives is that we can get frozen in snap shots.

And what's the problem with the snap shot? Life isn't a moment frozen in time- it keeps moving. And if we get stuck in that moment- whether it is good or bad- we create a terrible problem for ourselves.

If it's bad we- like those caught in post-traumatic stress live in an ongoing hell.

If it's good, we- like 1000s live trying to re-capture a moment that's gone. We stop living for the future. Life is not like a still-shot it is more like a moving train.



As we look to 2009, the lesson that stuck me, as I listened to the story was that we need to make sure we are living life as it moves along- and not get stuck in snap-shots. We don't know what 2009 will bring but it is safe to say it will have moments of both joy and challenge.

I think if we understand how to do this well- we will be able to enjoy those great victorious snap-shots and learn from the hard ones but not get stuck in either one.

Not surprisingly the Bible shows us how not to get stuck in a snap-shot. And not surprisingly if you want to find direction of living life- the Psalms is a very good place to begin. Today we are looking first at Psalm 4. A Psalm of David. He begins-

Answer me when I call to you, O my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; be merciful to me and hear my prayer. Psalm 4:1

You can tell pretty quickly that something tough has rolled through David's life.

The Big Moment Hits David- It's A Bad One This Time

We don't what happened in David's life. He had all kinds of highs and lows but if David learned anything through his amazing life- it was how to keep moving. This time another tough has clobbered him.

I hope you quickly note how David reacts to trouble. When he feels hurt- he says he hurts. This is the first life lesson you can't miss in the Psalms-

#1. If It Hurts- Cry If You're Happy- Laugh

Now we are not to be people who swing from laughing to crying without warning. There is a place for sucking it up when tough times come- BUT Christians are NOT Stoics. David, as you read the Psalms was a person who knew how to find words for what he was feeling.

Now finding those words is not easy- but that is one of the gifts of Scripture and especially the Psalms- in them we find the words for almost every imaginable joy and sorrow.

But we also need to find our own words to say what our heart is feeling. It might seem obvious- but I think many people don't know that they need to do this- and that this takes practice.

Because people don't say what's on their heart- it is very difficult to move forward well.

But for those who do David now takes us through a

Know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself; the LORD will hear when I call to him. Psalm 4:3

#2. Know What Is- God Is With His People

When big stuff happens it shakes us up and when we are shaken up we need to find solid ground again.

At a physical level for those who have ever been in a serious accident know the process of checking to see what the damage is. Am I injured? If so- how serious is it?

But there is also a spiritual reality check required. This past week was a tragic one in the mountain of BC. As many as 11 people died in avalanches- and others survived. The most amazing story of this week was the young snowboarder who survived 3 nights on the mountain. The families of both have reality checks to go through as they come through such a time. The mother of the boy that survived the 3 days apparently made a statement in the News that God had rescued her son. Someone rightly pointed out that that was not an appropriate comment to make in the light of those whose sons had died.

Both the families of the survivors and the families of the victims need to face what is. Getting this reality right is very important- on both sides of the challenge.

The spiritual reality check, must be knowledge based. And what is it? David goes to what he knows regarding his faith in God- God has set apart His people and He will hear their prayers.

This fact does not alter if the crisis we face is a good one or a bad one. God takes His people through life's journey and that journey will have both triumph and tragedy but God hears His people in it all. This is the Biblical fact.

When everything seems to be shaking- just knowing and hanging onto this fact is sometimes all we can do- but doing it – from a knowledge base is the next place that David goes even as he cries out his joys and sorrows to his God.

This set takes place within the mind and may not really have any particular outward indications.

But David now goes through a series of do's and don't that are action based. I don't know about you but I like to know what I am supposed to do. Here is David's list

#3. The Action Plan

In your anger do not sin; Psalm 4:4a

First- Do Not Sin

When we face a crisis the most natural response is anger- especially if we have had something taken from us. I find it interesting that David does not, at this point, say, "Don't be angry."

Instead he says, "Don't sin."

For most of us anger is something that kicks in for the most part involuntarily. What is voluntary however, is the action that follows from that anger. That action might be physical or it might be verbal but in both cases it often is a way of lashing out at those around us- and in many cases people whose role in our crisis is only vaguely connected to what has happened.

But what happens next? Now a new crisis emerges as the result of what we have done. The anger without an action restraint now sparks another problem that hadn't been there before.

What is David's first, to-do? It is- resist the temptation to do something bad.

This is such an obvious instruction but how many of us have a list of regrets because we let our anger take us down a road to a whole new disaster.

But David moves on-

when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.

Psalm 4:4b

Second- Check Your Pulse Rate And Be Quiet

Like many people my age, I have high blood pressure. This has been the case for several years now. Like many men, my blood pressure goes up just walking into a doctor's office and so my doctor suggested I get a blood pressure tester for home. So I did and now I periodically check my blood pressure.

I have, in the course of doing this for several years, discovered that there are situations that arise that send my blood pressure way up. Not a big surprise- I'm sure.

But in order to check my blood pressure- I need to sit down, calm down, and be silent. This needs to take place in order to even find out where my blood pressure actually is.

The procedure for doing this is identical in the physical and spiritual sides of our beings.

For most people times of crisis peak at night, especially for those who struggle with sleeplessness. This is the time when our minds seem to take over and fear and anxiety have a special power over us. David speaks directly to this time. He knows about night terrors.

I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. Psalm 6:6

But he also knows what he is supposed to do at times like this- find a way to make the mind stop its course of anger, fear or anxiety long enough to get a mental pulse rate.

For anyone who has, like David suffered with night terrors and knows what it is like to go night after night suffering from anxiety, there is no quick fix to this- but David's direction is quite manageable- be silent long enough to get your "spiritual blood pressure." In the context that David writes this it is even at night when you are already lying down in your bed.

It's another piece of the package.

But David adds something else-

Offer right sacrifices and trust in the LORD. Psalm 4:5

Third- Make Solid Plans And Go With Them

Life doesn't stop and going forward means that plans for the future have to be made. For those serve God the plan for the future revolves around having our orientation to God correctly aligned. From the very beginning- aligning ourselves to God involved sacrifice.

Why is this? Because God's way doesn't come without effort on our parts. The effort primarily involves not just going with the flow of life but setting a course in a good direction. To get somewhere requires putting in the effort to get there.

But this sacrifice is not just about making extravagant promises to God when we find ourselves in a pickle. That is something most of us are very familiar with. When we find ourselves in a crisis we will likely say virtually anything to give us relief.

But David is clear, "offer right sacrifices". And what is a "right" sacrifice?

That is not a vague challenge- it is very specific and is summarized in numerous places in the Bible. Paul says it like this-

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Romans 12:1

When we have done that we set ourselves on a course that David ran many times in his lifetime.

But as I reflected on the year past and the year ahead there is one more aspect to taking hold of life that struck me. It is captured in another Psalm of David- Psalm 68.

A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. Psalm 68:5

When we face a crisis we feel alone- sometimes even when we seem to have many people around us. We feel like widows and orphan.

But God speaks directly to that- the journey of His people is not supposed to be a solitary walk. We may feel alone but-

God sets the lonely in families . . . Psalm 68:6

#4. It's A Team Game- We're Not To Be On The Train Alone

It is very easy to give good lists of actions but the reality is [and we know it from reading the Psalms] that just having a victory does not mean the war is over or that a defeat isn't lurking around the corner.

The list is important and we need to get back to it over and over again.

I heard an interesting stat from Dr Art Hister. Only 50% of those who try to quit smoking succeed- but if you don't try you aren't part of those odds. His advice for those who failed- "Try again. 100% of those who don't try to quite- don't quit."

That is a principle for life.

But having said that, doing the long run alone is really tough and not the way God intended it.

Some time last year I had a call from a person who read one of my articles in the MBH. She was part of a large Vancouver Church where she had been active for a long time.

But in the last couple of years she had fallen into a deep, sad lonely place. She felt like she didn't fit in. As she told me her story over the phone it was indeed as sad a story as you could imagine. She had been part of the Willy Picken world and the horror of that world obviously had torn her apart.

And now she felt that her church family had somehow forgotten her as well.

It feels quite helpless to talk to someone whose only connection to you is an article but all I could think of telling her was- "Go back to that family. I don't doubt that they should have done

more for you but pulling away will only make things worse.” I hope she did.

Our challenge for the year ahead is 2fold. First, we a family we need to remember that we can never fail to make sure there is room for one more person to join. The church can never be full.

But the other side of it is- we have to make sure that we know that God has placed us in a family and we need to make the continual effort to make that a reality.

In Psalm 68 David concludes with a wonderful image-

When you went out before your people, O God, when you marched through the wasteland . . . You gave abundant showers, O God; you refreshed your weary inheritance.

Your people settled in it, and from your bounty, O God, you provided for the poor. The Lord announced the word, and great was the company of those who proclaimed it. Psalm 68:7-11

It is a congregation- a people- a team that is to take this journey together.

This next year will have its ups and downs. After a tough year it could be easy to feel down at such a thought- but for those who take their cue from Scripture there is not reason to do so. Far from it David responds to those who are discouraged-

Many are asking, "Who can show us any good?" Psalm 4:6a
David's answer is very clear-

Let the light of your face shine upon us, O LORD. You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound. Psalm 4:6-7

And then he adds something that those whose worst moments come at night-

I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety. Psalm 4:8

That is the conclusion- not the beginning of David's life lesson- it is where we are going and it is a good place.