

Seize the Hope

sermon digest

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Hebrews 6:10-19

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In “Dead Poet’s Society,” Robin Williams plays the role of John Keating, the young English teacher at Welton Academy, an aristocratic prep school for boys. The movie is about challenging tradition, learning to think outside the box, living for the moment. In the defining scene, Mr. Keating gathers his class in the hall and has a student, Pitts, to read from the poet Robert Herrick: “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may/ O Time is still a’ flying/And this same flower that smiles today tomorrow will be dying.” Keating’s word for his students is *carpe diem*, “seize the day.” Calling attention to the photo of an early Welton football team, Keating notes that all of the young, hormone-driven athletes in the photo are dead. Time has slipped away from them—a rather grim message for high school kids at the dawn of life. Keating’s lesson for the day is, *carpe diem*: live today; tomorrow you die.

Carpe diem, the often repeated philosophy of life in time, has been passed down from the Roman orator Horace, who wrote, “While we’re talking, envious time is fleeing: *carpe diem*—seize the day, put no trust in the future.” Horace, the leading lyric poet during the time of Caesar Augustus, died about the time that Christ was born.

Some eight decades later, the unknown author of the message to Hebrew Christians in our New Testament offered a challenge to the limited vision of Horace. After a stern warning about “falling away” from the Christian life, the preacher of Hebrews offers a challenge that flies in the face of Horace. The preacher challenges Mr. Keating’s English class to look at another trophy case. There the old champion of faith Abraham has patiently endured the moment in order to find fulfillment in tomorrow. Abraham encountered the promise of God late in life, a promise of a son that seemed impossible to two centurions, according to Hebrews, “as good as dead.” For Abraham life is not about seizing the day; it is about trusting the promise of God for tomorrow even though he would not live to see the promise fulfilled. Abraham “obtained” the promise; he did not possess it. The word in Hebrews is, “seize the hope.” Anchor your soul in a hope bound to the very being of God, identified in the Hebrew mind with the inner sanctuary of the Temple, the Holy of Holies.

The eternal NOW calls for new commitment. The focus on the “now” of decision is a valid call to awakening in the Christian gospel. The nineteenth century theologian Soren Kierkegaard has been called the father of existentialism. He focused his message in the decision and commitment of today, and called for his generation to feel the pressure of the fleeting moment to live on the cutting edge of commitment to the Christ life.

The crisis theologians of the Great Depression and World Wars era felt the heat of global disaster in economic collapse and unprecedented wars and echoed the call to decision of SK. The success of Billy Graham in the 1950’s rode on the wave of awareness that we almost lost civilization in the philosophy of Hitler and the big war. Graham’s radio program “The Hour of Decision” was a new version of SK’s message calling the world to decision now and a new commitment to a new life in Christ. Graham’s message did not create the religious awakening of America so much as he addressed the shock and awe that history had presented to my generation with a call to decision. Hebrews (3:7-8) sounds the alarm: “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.’”

Paul Tillich could hardly be confused with an evangelist like Billy Graham, but like Graham, he spoke to the age of crisis. In *The Eternal Now*, (p. 125-6) Tillich affirmed the biblical notion that time moves toward an end. Tillich acknowledged that the uncertainty of the future frightens and threatens us: “we go towards something that is not yet, and we come from something that is no more. We are what we are by what we came from. We have a beginning, as we have an end.” He called attention to the word of God in Revelation: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end,” and suggested: “If we want to speak in truth without foolish, wishful thinking, we should speak about the eternal.”

As we come to a conclusion of our meditations on time, we would do well to avoid obsession with one dimension of time as if we could live without the past or the future.

Life flows through the three tenses of time. We live out of the foundations of history, a past that

is behind us and beyond repair. We live toward the future which we may not see and we cannot anticipate. In every generation, we are only alive today, the dynamic “now” that we are deciding and living. *Carpe diem*; seize the day.

No! Take another look. First, We may not have the power to change yesterday, but we are children born of history, shaped by the decisions and commitments of someone else’s “today.” The past constantly bleeds into the present, affecting everything we do and decide today. The dead poets are still speaking to the world in which we live. Second, we may not anticipate the future, and we certainly cannot possess the tomorrow after death, but we cannot avoid the fact of life that we are laying foundations for the next generation. Only a blind egocentrism closes its eyes to the world we are creating for our children and grandchildren. The self-centered philosophy oft-quoted even in the Bible, “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die,” is a version of *carpe diem* lacking in vision and closed to the well-being of everyone but the dominant ME.

Yet another economist was speaking to the present crisis on the news last week, only he had left the hard-fact world of economics to the mystical world of human behavior. He supported his commentary on the lifestyle of recent decades based on blind existentialism. Not only was the prevailing economic policy of the typical U.S. household *carpe diem* seize the day, it was rooted in a consumer mentality that called for the present generation to consume tomorrow as well. We have lived on credit. In recent years the savings level of the U.S. family has been negative. Rather than saving, people have been consuming tomorrow. Suddenly, economic crisis has caused people to refrain from spending. Perhaps there is something to delayed gratification. This wild revolutionary economist had the audacity to say that this economic crisis may be good for us. We may start thinking about tomorrow and future generations.

The problem of existentialism, is an obsession with today as if yesterday and tomorrow are not a part of our present existence. Nostalgia similarly gets obsessed with yesterday and attempts to live in the past as if we could dismiss the present world. Futurists are often obsessed with forecasting to the neglect of the reality that we live in the now.

Seize the hope. Eschatology, the study of last things, has gotten a bad rap in Christian history. Too many crazies have been on the loose (and still are): promoting violence in the name of God, predicting the date of the end of the world, accusing this or that world leader of being “Antichrist,” arrogantly claiming to be the elite “raptured” out of the world before the final crisis, supporting war between Israel and her neighbors to accelerate the end events, damning other religions and differing Christians. Shall I say more?

Throwing the baby out with the bath water is not a good option. Even the wild images in Daniel and Revelation serve a valid purpose in biblical history, affirming the rule of God over all events and the destiny of the creation. The writer to Hebrews suggested that sisters and brothers “Seize the Hope.”

Of course we have no power to possess the future, no more than Abraham, who lived without a clear view of the fulfillment of the covenant of God. With Abraham, all that we have going for us is trust in the eternal God, the Alpha and Omega, who keeps calling us forward into tomorrow. The Christian life leans forward, never blind to the past or uncommitted in the present, but always concerned with a vision of tomorrow, always aware of the legacy that we leave to future generations. Seize the hope!