

March 9, 2008 Sermon by Reverend Jones

Romans 8:6-11

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Revelation 22:1-7

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever.

And he said to me, 'These words are trustworthy and true, for the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.'

'See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.'

... And the Omega

Repent! The end is near! Maybe. Or maybe not. It depends on what you mean by near. The University of Sussex in England recently released a studying updating something they had published earlier. Apparently, the sun will expand, capturing and vaporizing the earth, unless we figure out how to capture the energy of a passing asteroid. They even know about when this will happen. They estimate about 7.6 billion years from now. Sounds like the sort of thing that will happen on a Monday.

Others put the date a little closer. Some of them attempt to pin down the beginning of the end to a formal date, usually revising when that date passes without incident.

Me? I don't really know when the end will come. I don't think anybody else does, either. No matter how carefully they have studied prophecies, the stars, or centuries old scrolls, they simply don't know. Now there are plenty of individuals running around who say they do know. They tell everyone on the streets. Some of them even do it from the pulpit. Some of them have websites, a few of which are particularly entertaining. Just for the record, the rapture index is currently at 168. Apparently this is calculated using a very careful formula taking into effect such statistics as unemployment, the price of oil, and how many people in the world claim to be Christ. 168 is very high, so be on the lookout for the end of the world. If it happens, don't say I didn't warn you.

As Presbyterians, we don't spend a lot of time talking about the end of the world. I believe this is for a good reason, we don't know when it will happen, and we don't have any control over it. There is currently a strong movement by some Christians to invest money in Israel, believing that if they can convince Israel to annex more of the Middle East they will have done their part in bringing about Armageddon. Personally, I question investing millions of dollars in such a cause. If we believe that God is sovereign, we must accept that the end will come on God's time, not when we decide to make a push for it. However, simply because we accept that this is in God's hands does not mean we are to ignore it. We are still charged to consider the eternal significance of our actions and how we are preparing to live for eternity with God in heaven.

How many of you have spent time sitting in traffic in a construction zone? When we moved into Ooltewah, somehow our realtor didn't bother to mention the massive construction project that recently got under way focusing on the renovation of exit 11. Anyone who has tried to drive north on I-75 around five o'clock realizes that is no minor oversight! As I drive to work each morning I am fascinated at the amount of dirt being moved and the machines that are moving the earth so that

the roads might find a route more convenient to the number of cars that use that area. It is no small feat, and the 3 year time frame reflects that. I have to confess I am less than thrilled at the thought of witnessing and experiencing all the phases of the project.

Our lives are not that different than this undertaking. We are like those roads, undulating and pockmarked, full of cracks that expand and contract depending upon the pressure around us, occasionally sinking into potholes or slipping off the shoulder, in need of some repair and some asphalt to patch up those rough marks, those divots upon what once was a smooth surface. We, too, are in need of repair, in need of construction. Only it's not a three year project. It takes a lifetime.

It's difficult to sit in traffic and imagine what the end will be like, what the roads will be like when they are smooth and new, straight and well-marked, allowing us to travel easily from one place to another. Merging into lanes to avoid orange barrels and wondering about how much dirt must be moved before the pavers can come, it's easy to forget the goal ahead.

It is the same with our lives. It's difficult to sit and imagine what we will be like, what it all will look like, when the construction is completed, when we will be servants in heaven, no longer in need of patches or quick fixes, but finally complete, with the name of God written across our foreheads, with songs of praise bursting forth from our lips, basking in the light of God and of the lamb. Here, in the midst of construction, it can be hard to imagine the road ahead, much less the image of the completed project.

So what are we to do? As in driving, we must pay attention to the road. We cannot simply close our eyes and dream wishfully of the glory days ahead, when everything will be perfect and none of the orange barrels of life will wait to greet us, slowing us down and causing us frustration. The reality is, we're here, and we have to navigate life's path. We have material needs, and the reality of everyday life is that we must go to work, do the laundry, cook dinner, do homework, feed the dog, and pay the bills. These can all seem like great burdens, and sometimes they are. But we

can't simply push them off, pretending they aren't real. We can, however, remember that these needs are to take their place in line behind our eternal significance. We are to remember that this construction project does have a plan, does have someone in charge, and does have an end, and someday, we will be living in the perfected, completed reality of heaven. Someday we will see the river of the water of life, and we will bask in the light emanating from the throne of God. Someday we will do this, and we must be preparing for it. We are called to live as people who will be around forever, and we must ensure that our choices reflect the importance of God's kingdom. We must ensure that our lives reflect our hope that lies in God alone, the Alpha and Omega, the God who spins the whirling planets, the God who is in charge of all of this. God is calling us to faith, and we are to remember that it is God's kingdom that will survive for eternity, not this earthly kingdom we inhabit. The needs we have for our daily lives are important, but they are not as critical as ensuring that we are paying attention to our spiritual life, attending to the cracks and potholes that appear in that.

God wants us to be led by the Spirit in all that we do, remembering that we have an eternal purpose, a goal of praising God in all we do. We are not to forget that final project in the midst of constant distractions. We are to throw all of life onto God's shoulders, letting God lead us to the place God has prepared for us, a place where the throne of God and of the lamb will be in the city, a place with no darkness, only light, a place where we will worship forever. This is God's promise to those who profess the name of Jesus Christ. God is faithful, and will keep those promises. Even in our darkest moments, in our deepest failures, God keeps those promises, and even more, God abides with us in those moments, in that darkest despair. God is beside us, comforting and supporting us, leading us forward, reminding us of the future that awaits.

God is always poking, prodding us, reminding us to look forward, beyond the mess and construction we often can't see past. God is reminding us of God's eternal reign, of the place God

has prepared for us, the place with the tree of life with healing for the nations, the city with the water of life, clear as crystal. God offers this freely to all who believe, to those who desire to be led by the Spirit and proclaim the truth of the Gospel, the glory of salvation and the Good News of Jesus Christ in all we do. In all we do. Here, now, as we wait for that salvation, for God to write the final chapter, to come again in power and glory, we are to live with that Good News in our hearts and on our tongues. We are to remember to serve God here and now, all the while remembering that we are freed from the bondage of our sins because of Jesus Christ, and this construction, this project of our lives, will one day be completed because of the incredible love and grace of God. One day all will be made new, but we can't just wait, we are to live in joyful response to this offering of grace, in thanksgiving to God for all that God has done. We are to remember that God is the Alpha, the creator of the universe, the one whose light pushed back the darkness. And we are to remember that God is the Omega, the ruler for all time, who will watch the mountains crumble and the seas dry up, who will rule when the stars fade and the earth disappears, who will still reign forever in heaven. May all we do proclaim our belief and trust in this everlasting God, and may we live with our eternal lives in our vision, constantly striving to glorify God and be led by the Spirit who raised Christ from the dead and promises life to these mortal bodies. One day there will be no more night, and we will live in the light for all of time.

Let us pray.