



The Long View

TEXT
2 Timothy 2:1–9
Isaiah 55:1–11

May 1, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

What do you think life will be like at the end of this century? What do you think the church will be at the end of this century?

Marilynnne Robinson wrote a masterful novel called *Gilead*. The story line is an old dying preacher who writes a long letter to his young son. It begins like this:

*I told you last night that I might be gone sometime, and you said, Where, and I said, To be with the Good Lord, and you said, Why, and I said, Because I'm old, and you said, I don't think you're old. ... I told you you might have a very different life from mine, and from the life you've had with me, and that would be a wonderful thing, there are many ways to live a good life.*¹

Ta-Nehisi Coates has written an important book. It's called *Between the World and Me*. It's a letter to his young son. It speaks of the powerful realities of racism that still erode the communal fabric of this country. He speaks of how a father's love of his black son lives in fear as he is powerless to protect him from what waits. It is an important but painful book.

2 Timothy is, in a manner of speaking, a letter from a father to a son. Scholars debate who actually wrote these ancient words. Most scholars don't think Paul was the author — at least not of these letters in the form we have them now. Maybe just fragments came from Paul. I don't know. But these letters have been handed to the church as words of Paul. Timothy was a generation younger, and Paul considered him a son.

It reads like a letter written to a son. In 2 Timothy, Paul is searching for those invisible tendons that tie faith in Jesus Christ from one generation to the next. He stands on the bridge between the generations, offering final words, last encouragements, parental advice.

Share in suffering like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving in the army gets entangled in everyday affairs; the soldier's aim is to please the enlisting officer. ... Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead ... that is my gospel, for which I suffer hardship.

Paul speaks of suffering often. Suffering is never the goal, but rather the byproduct of a life of faithfulness. Paul's experience is that being a Christian in this world means we will suffer.

That was certainly true for Jesus. Paul says, *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead; that is my gospel for which I suffer hardship.*

Why would the resurrection of Jesus mean we suffer? Resurrection is not just an event for Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus Christ shows us the difference between the world as it is and the world as God wants it to be. Recognizing the difference causes suffering. Striving to reduce that difference requires sacrifice.

Paul says, *Share in suffering like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving in the army gets entangled in everyday affairs; the soldier's aim is to please the enlisting officer.*

If I understand it, Paul is saying, take the long view. Of course, Jesus Christ is the enlisting officer. He is the one the Christian endeavors to please.

The challenge is to keep the "enlisting officer" in view. As we move through our lives, we become consumed by other matters — matters that may seem urgent, but matters that are not important.² In other words, we fail to take the long view.

I think failing to take the long view is what happened in

Flint, Michigan. You know the story. In April of 2014, Flint began drawing their water from a local river rather than purchasing Lake Huron water from Detroit. Immediately, the smell and the color changed. People began reporting burning skin, tremors, hair loss and seizures. For well over a year, the river water corroded the old pipes, leaching lead into the showers and sinks of over 100,000 citizens of Flint.

When the Flint City Council voted to reverse this decision and purchase Lake Huron water from Detroit, the governor's office overruled the decision.³ This has been what *Time Magazine* called "The Poisoning of an American City." Money was tight. There was an urgent need. So what was important? The health of the people was overlooked. No one took the long view.

Of course you probably read that for a few days last week, the City of Olathe was delivering bottled water to residents because there was concern of elevated lead in the water supply. Later tests showed no reason for concern. But it made me shudder. Taking the long view requires sacrificing some today so that things might be right or closer to right tomorrow.

The long view for Christians is the promised day of God; the day when life is lived as God intends for us, for our children, for all. We will never realize that day. But we are called each day to keep that promised day in mind and let that ultimate truth shape our choices now. When we do, it changes us.

I was in second grade when my parents told me they needed to talk. We sat at the table in our kitchen, each in our vinyl-covered chairs. I could tell they hadn't made a plan. They didn't know who was supposed to say what. I knew report cards had not come out yet, so I couldn't imagine what this was about.

After stumbling around a bit, my dad said, "We want you to know that Mom's going to have another baby. You will have a younger brother or sister."

I said, "Today?" I wasn't the brightest second-grader.

"No, after Christmas." Well, it was still September; "after Christmas" may not ever get here. They said, "We just wanted you to be prepared."

"OK, I'll get right to that."

It wasn't long before a crib showed up in my room. "Mom, second-graders don't use cribs."

"It's not for you; it's for the baby."

"Is the baby here?"

"No, not yet. We just want to be prepared."

And then they painted my room: one sky blue wall with clouds on the wall, right next to the crib. This is ridiculous; this kid's going to think he's falling out of an airplane for the first nine months of his life. Painting my room? We just want to be prepared.

The point is, my brother was coming, so we couldn't go on with business as usual. We didn't know exactly when he would arrive, but because we trusted he was coming, we couldn't go on status quo. Things changed.

When today is defined by the promised tomorrow, that's the long view.

Paul says, in Jesus we have seen a new way for the world, so different from the way it is now and so compelling that we must be willing to live toward that day, even if it causes us to sacrifice.

Later this morning, we will dedicate this Welcome Center. The Heritage Committee has been hard at work selecting items and information to include in a time capsule. They asked me to pick a sermon or two to put in the time capsule. There is no sermon I have ever preached that needs to be read 85 years from now.

And they asked me to write a letter to the future church. If you could say something to the congregation of Village Church at the end of this century, what would you say? It would require you to take the long view.

No doubt things that seem really important to us now will seem less important. I can't imagine what life will be like at the end of the century. What will worship look like? If trends continue, I wonder if Communion may be the only meal people eat together. What will mission look like? Will it be service oriented, some people taking care of others? Or will it be more communal, people building healthier communities for everyone so we take care of one another? For what will they look back at us and give thanks to God for our faithfulness? And where will they look back at us and scratch their heads, wonder-

ing how we could have been so foolish and shortsighted?

How will we communicate then? What medical advances will there be? What will the shape of democracy be by the end of this century? What will the shape of the planet be in those days?

Friday a week ago was Earth Day. It's caused me to reflect that the State of Michigan is not the only place that has failed to take the long view when it comes to water.

I was reading the work of Christiana Peppard. She is a theologian, ethicist and expert on global fresh water ethics. In her book *Just Water*, Peppard sounds the alarm that the current practices of fresh water usage are not sustainable. If we keep using water the way we do, we will not have enough. That's not a future concern for some, as today there are 1.7 billion people who lack access to fresh water.

She notes that of all the water on the planet, over 97 percent of it is salt water, not great for drinking or for crops. Of the fresh water, 70 percent of it is in the ice caps; but we know they are melting into the salty sea. A very small percentage of the fresh water, 0.3 percent, is what she calls renewable water, ground water replenished by the rains.⁴

What I didn't know — and truthfully, didn't even think about — is that water can be lost. It can run short and, in many places in the world, it already has. The UN notes that water usage has increased at more than twice the rate of

population growth in the last century. We use a lot more water than our ancestors. Most of that is the modern practice of agriculture. Agriculture consumes 70 percent of water withdrawals.⁵

We have advanced technology, and now we are not only able to irrigate fields, but we can tap aquifers deep below the ground and pump that water to the surface to water crops. That is a gift because we are able to produce food to feed a growing population. But the aquifers are decreasing, and they can't be replaced. When they run out, then what?

I had no idea how much water is required to produce the food we need for life.

For example, roughly 2,000 gallons of water are required to produce just one pound of beef. One cup of coffee, those 40 or so coffee beans, well that's approximately 36.5 gallons of water per cup of coffee.⁶

I like my coffee. I don't tend to think of coffee having ethical implications. I don't tend to think about these simple choices having consequences for my neighbors — even neighbors who have yet to be born. But that's the way it works. Let me say this clearly: It's not about good or bad technology or good or bad people. This is about consequences, often unintended consequences, to which the long view requires we pay attention.

Now we might find our way out of this through technology. Carol and I watched the movie *The Martian*. In that movie,

Matt Damon gets left behind on Mars. He figures out how to grow food on Mars. He begins by learning how to make water. It's pretty cool, but at present, it is not science. It's still science fiction, at least right now.

According to a recent UN estimate, "By 2025, 180 million people will be living in countries or regions with absolute water scarcity, and two-thirds of the world population could be under stress conditions."⁷

I hope we find a way out of this, but taking the long view requires that we not assume we can continue to consume in unsustainable fashion what our great-grandchildren will need to survive. If we do, then the congregation of Village at the end of this century would be justified in viewing such consumption as selfish.

I have no idea what life will be like at the end of this century. No idea. But I have some idea of how God wants life to be in the end.

God wants us to love our neighbor, even if it requires sacrifice (and it will).

God wants us to seek the best in one another, but to also be honest about the consequences of our choices.

God wants us to be generous and kind and just.

God wants us to pay more attention to our responsibilities than our rights.

God wants us to value relationship more than power and goodness more than gain.

God wants us to take the long view, which is defined by the promised day of God.

The question today is: Is that a future worth sacrificing for? Sacrifice is the only way we will know that future.

¹Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (2004), p. 3

²I have in mind the teaching of Steven Covey, who spoke of how we pay more attention to things that need our attention today, while sometimes sacrificing those things that require planning, reflection, thinking ahead. It's failing to take the long view.

³*The Poisoning of an American City, Time*, February 1, 2016, p. 34

⁴Christiana Z. Peppard, *Just Water* (2014), p. 21

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 68

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 69–70

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 32

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.