



Roanoke, Virginia
Legacy Sunday
May 13, 2018

“Where We Are Led, and What We Leave Behind”

Psalm 49 and John 10:1-5
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Psalm 49:

¹⁻² Listen, everyone, listen—
earth-dwellers, don't miss this.
All you have
and have-nots,
All together now: listen.
³⁻⁴ I set plainspoken wisdom before you,
my heart-seasoned understandings of life.
I fine-tuned my ear to the sayings of the wise,
I solve life's riddle with the help of a harp.
⁵⁻⁶ So why should I fear in bad times,
hemmed in by enemy malice,
Shoved around by bullies,
demeaned by the arrogant rich?
⁷⁻⁹ Really! There's no such thing as self-rescue,
pulling yourself up by your bootstraps.
The cost of rescue is beyond our means,
and even then it doesn't guarantee
Life forever, or insurance
against the Black Hole.
¹⁰⁻¹¹ Anyone can see that the brightest and best die,
wiped out right along with fools and dunces.
They leave all their prowess behind,
move into their new home, The Coffin,
The cemetery their permanent address.
And to think they named counties after themselves!
¹² We aren't immortal. We don't last long.
Like our dogs, we age and weaken. And die.
¹³⁻¹⁵ This is what happens to those who live for the moment,
who only look out for themselves:
Death herds them like sheep straight to hell;

they disappear down the gullet of the grave;
They waste away to nothing—
nothing left but a marker in a cemetery.
But me? God snatches me from the clutch of death,
he reaches down and grabs me.
¹⁶⁻¹⁹ So don't be impressed with those who get rich
and pile up fame and fortune.
They can't take it with them;
fame and fortune all get left behind.
Just when they think they've arrived
and folks praise them because they've made good,
They enter the family burial plot
where they'll never see sunshine again.
²⁰ We aren't immortal. We don't last long.
Like our dogs, we age and weaken. And die.

John 10:1-5

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

So, this past week, George Cartledge calls me.
I'm talking about George III,
Middle George,
Son of George Jr. and father of George the IV.
You know,
that George.

That George called me. He and his family; like Rachel Thompson, Sarah and Kirk Ludwig, and probably some others of you; were fortunate enough to see the musical *Hamilton* on Broadway. George knows I love theater and he wanted to know if I had thought theologically about the song, “*Wait For It*.”

As a matter of fact, I had. I thought theologically about “*Wait For It*” the first time I heard it on the soundtrack I bought, and again the next ten times I listened to it. The *Hamilton* soundtrack is the perfect length for the commute from my house to my parents' house in Montreat. I hope to think theologically about the song again if I ever get to do what that other George got to do and go to the musical on Broadway or somewhere else.

Honestly, though, I think anyone who has been church-ed at all has thought theologically about this song. “*Wait for It*” almost forces you to.

What I had not thought of doing is to use the song for the sermon I was preparing this week on Psalm 49 and John 10. I thank George for bringing it up because “*Wait For It*” fit right in my thoughts about these passages.

On the soundtrack, the song is sung by the uber-talented Leslie Odom, Jr. who portrays Aaron Burr. Aaron knows how ruthless death can be, regardless of one's virtue or lack of it. He lost his parents and other loved ones while still a child... and his father was a preacher and his mother a saint.

Aaron lives with another burden. The ghosts of his ancestors haunt him... not literally, but in the weight of their accomplishments and what he thinks are their expectations. He is the grandson of the most celebrated American preacher and evangelist ever to live, Jonathan Edwards. Edwards was famous for many reasons, but culturally he was famous primarily because he kick-started the revival of the Great Awakening with his frightening sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." In that sermon, he depicted the souls of those in attendances as hanging by spider's threads over the fires of Hell. People wailed for mercy and gave their lives over to God.

Edwards was famous and he was brilliant. He passed on that brilliance to his children, grandchildren... and generations after that. If the genealogy grading scale is based on recognized accomplishment, than the Edwards family tree messes up the grading curve for every other American family. His descendants include 3 senators, 3 governors, 3 mayors, 13 college presidents, 30 judges, 65 professors, 100 missionaries... the list goes on and on.

The honor roll of distinguished descendants already is growing long by the time grandson Aaron Burr became is a young man. Burr's ambition is to meet or exceed the accomplishments of his parents' generation. His burden is that he doesn't want to blow it. He doesn't want to take a risk he'll later regret. He is jealous of the way Alexander Hamilton so freely speaks his mind and has gotten by with it; advancing so rapidly in the eyes of his peers. Burr will get there, though, just by a safer route. He will have to "wait for it."

That is what he sings about in the song, "*Wait for it.*" Burr first sings of Theodosia, the wife of a British Officer with whom he is having an affair and who he wants one day to be his wife. He sings,

Love doesn't discriminate
Between the sinners and the saints
It takes and it takes and it takes
And we keep loving anyway.
We laugh and we cry
And we break
And we make our mistakes
And if there is a reason I'm by her side
When so many have tried
Then I'm willing to wait for it.
I'm willing to wait for it.

Then Burr reveals he is haunted by the memory of his ancestors who would judge him for the affair and who also expect so much of him.

My father was a fire and brimstone preacher.
But there are things
That the homilies and hymns won't teach ya.
My mother was a genius
My father commanded respect.

When they died they left no instructions
Just a legacy to protect.

His ancestors just need to cut him some slack. They died and left him on his own to figure it out what he needs to do to be included in the Edwards Family Hall of Fame... *and* he needs to figure it out before he dies. He sings:

Death doesn't discriminate
Between the sinners and the saints.
It takes and it takes and it takes
And we keep living anyway.
We rise and we fall
And we break and we make our mistakes
And if there is a reason I'm still alive
When everyone who loves me has died
I'm willing to wait for it
I'm willing to wait for it.

I love talking about this song, the musical it comes from, and the character of Aaron Burr. But this is Mountain Ave., not Broadway, and the most important texts we have before us are passages of scripture not lyrics of a song.

What we do have, however, is the perfect line from our song that joins us to our psalm:
Death doesn't discriminate
Between the sinners and the Saints.
It takes, and it takes, and it takes.

It is almost as if Burr is paraphrasing Psalm 49; getting part of the psalm just right, while missing its overall point. Psalm 49 describes death as a shepherd. The shepherd calls and the sheep must follow. Are you rich? Death cannot be ransomed? Are you wise? Death cannot be unimpressed by clever repartee. Where death leads, all must follow, and all must be left behind.

The psalmist is not depressed by this however. This news is depressing only for those who are like Aaron Burr of the musical; those who think that their significance depends on

- how much they have,
- how much they know,
- how much they accomplish, or
- how much status they achieve.

While not in denial of death, the psalmist ends his psalm by affirming God. While everything that the world says makes us "somebodies" has to be left behind- riches, power, reputation- what we have at the end is nothing... except God. God will not leave us behind. When all is lost, everything is gained.

I wonder if Jesus had Psalm 49 in mind when he speaks of the Good Shepherd in the Gospel of John. Jesus gives a whole different view to the picture of sheep following the voice of their shepherd. He casts himself as the Good Shepherd who will lead his sheep through the

narrow gate that is death. He will go ahead of his sheep; go ahead of them in death. But he is leading them to life; life with God.

If what you hear in what Jesus says is an affirmation of life after death that is wonderful..., but not enough. In fact, if you think that Jesus is *only* talking of life after death, you miss the point. Jesus is talking about life with God-

- the life Jesus knows in God-
("I am the Father and the Son," he says elsewhere in John),
What flows from God flows to me.
- and the life with God his followers can know in him
(Again from John:
"I am the vine, you are the branches."
What flows from God through me flows to you.
"I have loved you as God has loved me. So love one another."
What flows from God from me to you should flow to others.

That is the legacy of love, and in the end, it is the only legacy that matters. All we have at death is the affirmation that God is love, and God loves us. Stripped over everything, God loves us and won't let us go. Faith, stripped naked, is simple. We love because we have been loved. We matter, others matter, because we matter to God.

Let's go back to Aaron Burr (I said I was leaving him behind, but now he's back). Burr is haunted by the achievements of his relatives and the fame of his grandfather, Jonathan Edwards. Aaron thinks that the legacy of his grandfather is worldly achievement; becoming someone famous and acclaimed. But here the truth about his grandfather, Jonathan Edwards, a truth that Aaron doesn't learn- he later kills Alexander Hamilton in a duel because he thinks Alexander took from him what he would have to give up in the end anyway: his being the country's president. Edwards may have been famous for preaching a fire and brimstone sermon that jump-started a great awakening. But what Edwards was to his core was a gentle and warm man who loved others intensely, beginning with his family. He was kind and gracious. He was rightfully adored by his children because Edwards gave himself to their care, their education- their whole lives. Jonathan Edwards' love of others was his true legacy. His children mattered to him; but not for what they achieved but because they were his children to love. And I think it was the legacy of his unconditional love- not fear of Hell or fear of failure- that helped his children and so many of his ancestors to thrive.

Today is *Legacy Sunday* (until this year, we called it *Wills Emphasis Sunday*). Joe Miller, our treasurer, and Nancy Gray, a member of the Stewardship Committee, will talk briefly after the 11:00 o'clock service about the accomplishments and possibilities of the funds that have been made possible by bequests and special gifts. I hope you'll stay to hear it because it speaks to means by which this church makes a witness in the world.

I hope you all know that there is no demand or expectation that everyone to leave this church a bequest or make a special gift to the funds. The message of this Sunday is the legacy of love. Whatever we can give or leave to our family, our causes, our community or this church are all temporal. Some say that we live on in our loved ones' memories, but memories are temporal too.

At their best, what we leave behind are sacramental signs; they are temporal gifts that do not last, but which are signs of eternal truths that do last:

- the truth that God is love,
- that God loves us in Jesus,
- and we are to love others as we have been loved.

If a gift or a bequest to one of the funds can a joyful means of your expressing your love of God; then the church can only be thankful and then promise, as long as we can- for generations we trust- to be the best stewards of the gift that we can be as a witness to the only thing that matters in the end: God's love.