

Resolute & Purposeful
Sermon 6: Living Long in the Land sermon series
For Sunday 3rd March 2024
Preacher: Very Rev Hamish Galloway

Text:

Ephesians 1: 3-10

Matthew 16: 21-23

Introduction

One of the big news stories of the last couple of weeks has been the death of the Russian dissident Alexei Navalny in an a brutal artic prison. And one of the questions that have been swirling around his death has been why he went back to Russia after he was poisoned in 2020. He recovered elsewhere in Europe, but made a decision to go back to Russia knowing his almost certain fate was death. I am sure people advised him against it. He was clearly driven by his love of his people and a desire to see an end to the corrupt Putin regime. But he was also motivated by Christian faith. When talking about his purpose in life, what drove him, he often referenced his Christian faith. He was particularly inspired by the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount:

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied" (Matt. 5:6)

Navalny was a man on a mission, resolute and purpose filled! And his actions were so Christ like! Because Jesus was also a man with a mission, resolute and purpose filled! In Luke 9:51 we read

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.

We know just how resolute he was because, when Peter got in his way with protestations and opposition to the plan, he was told in no uncertain terms

Get behind me Satan. You are a stumbling block to me, you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of man.

Put more politely, 'Get on board with God's plan, Peter!'

And the Bible is clear, God does have a plan! In Ephesians 1:3-10, Paul talks about this plan being formed before the foundation of the world (v4) to the time when the plan will be 'fulfilled', the plan to reconcile all things on heaven and on earth (v10)

I have this image of God sitting down and devising a master plan for his great project of human life on planet earth set within context of a vast and beautiful universe, with loving relationship as the central goal.

And in this great plan there is Jesus, right at the heart of the plan, redeeming lost humanity and reconciling us back into loving relationship with God through his death and resurrection:

In Jesus we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding (Ephesians 4:7-8)

Peter didn't understand that plan! Jesus totally got it. It drove him. Biblical scholars see Luke 9:51, where Jesus is said to have set his face resolutely toward Jerusalem, as the beginning of the Jerusalem journey in Luke's gospel.

The biblical scholar Darrell Bock put it this way:

Luke's account portrays a journey of destiny in which Jesus must meet his fate.

The rest of Luke's gospel takes place under the coming shadow of the impending cross, with the repeating of this theme as pearls being strung together into a precious necklace.

This is a striking example of a man who knows where he fits in God's big plan for the world and is inspired by, motivated by, driven on by this purpose.

1. The Power of Purpose

Jesus' resolute following of his purpose led to an early death! But for most of us having purpose in our life is a key element in the chance of extending good life.

In *The Blue Zones, Secrets for Living Longer, Lessons From the Healthiest Places on Earth*, Dan Buethner identifies purpose as number 2 on the list of 'rules to live longer by'

People in the blue zones don't wake up feeling rudderless. They're invested in family, keeping their minds engaged, and keeping daily rituals to downshift and reduce stress. They're drive by their lives' meaning and purpose.

Research shows that a strong sense of purpose may reduce the chances of suffering from Alzheimer's disease, arthritis and stroke. A National Institutes of Health-funded study looked at the correlation between having a sense of purpose and longevity. It found that healthy people between the ages of 65 and 92 who expressed having clear goals or a purpose lived up to seven years longer and were sharper than those who did not. This is because individuals who understand what brings them joy and happiness tend to have what we like to call the right outlook. They are engulfed in activities and communities that allow them to immerse themselves in a rewarding and gratifying environment.

One of the Blue Zones is in Okinawa in Japan. Older Okinawans can readily articulate the reason they get up in the morning. Their purpose imbued lives give them clear roles of responsibility and feeling of being needed well into their 100's

And in the Costa Rica Blue Zone, the oldies find purpose and joy in everyday physical chores, including gardening, maintaining their land, cooking and looking after the younger generations in their families.

In the very first sermon in this Living Long in the Land series, we reflected on the life of the elderly Simeon, who prayed for the infant Jesus at his dedication in the temple. It was clear from the text that Simeon's reason for living long was strong, it was not to die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. It reminds me of the dying who hang on to life until a loved one arrives from overseas!

Victor Frankl is an important voice in the power of purpose. His book *Man's Search for Meaning* based on his experiences in Auschwitz states that those people with a purpose to live had higher rates of survival.

Frankl observed that those prisoners who survived, who found a way to endure, always had a greater purpose that carried them onward through difficult conditions. For some it was a child who was sheltered away in some distant country and who was waiting for them upon liberation. For others it was a spouse or family member. For others it was an unfinished task or creative work that required their unique contribution.

Frankl and his friends were constantly on watch for fellow prisoners who lost their purpose for life: "The prisoner who had lost faith in the future – his future – was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and become subject to mental and physical decay."

While working in a camp hospital, Frankl noticed the death rate spiked the week between Christmas and New Year's in 1944. He attributed the dramatic increase to the number of prisoners who were naively holding out hope for liberation before Christmas. As the end of the year drew closer and it became clear that their situation was unchanged, they lost courage and hope. This in turn impacted their power of resistance and their ability to survive.

Frankl refers several times to the words of Nietzsche: “He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.”

2. God’s purpose and our purpose

Christians generally have a heightened sense of purpose. We believe that this is a planned and purposeful universe, planned from before the beginning of time and moving toward a time when all things are reconciled. Compare that with an atheistic view that the universe is random and unplanned, and you see how it has the power to give us a reason to live.

Peter didn’t get that – he was bogged down by his own small, minded view of things when he tried to stop Jesus. One commentator that I read talked about how easy it is to ‘slide into a preoccupation with our own petty little affairs.’ That sums up Peter’s response here. By contrast, Paul saw the big picture, even when writing from the confines of home detention, handcuffed to a Roman soldier. He did not slide into a preoccupation with his own petty little affairs! Rather he found purpose in a Godly plan formed ‘before the foundations of the world,’ which will in time ‘reach fulfilment’ because of the grace of God shown in Jesus.

Where do we fit in this? There are some wonderful scriptures that inspire us to find our place in God’s big plan. I think of Psalm 139, v 13-16, where we read how God has plans for us from the point of our ‘knitting together in our mother’s womb.’ And then there is Jeremiah 29:11

‘For I know the plans I have for you’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’

What a wonderful promise and motivating inspiration.

What to do?

Write a God drenched purpose statement, I reckon!

Prayerfully considering scriptures like Ephesians 1, Psalm 139, Jeremiah 29:11, and the example of Jesus....

It could go like this:

Thank you, God, for your plan and purpose for the universe which I think involves:

Thank you, God, that you want me to be part of this hopeful story. And right now in my life this is how I see myself fitting in:

Or maybe write a poem that picks up on the themes of the sermon today – here is my effort!

Driftwood on a vast sea
Waves high and wild
Coming from all directions
Tossed and feeling lost

Or precious creation
A loving artisan
Master painter
Canvas purposefully stretched

One scenario burns
Hopeless into the soul
The other sears
Belonging into being

