

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 2, 2004

Eternal Life

John 10:22-30; Revelation 7:9-17

One of the great spiritual illnesses of our culture today
is our inability to see beyond the short-term,
to envision out beyond the horizon into the future,
and to see how our actions today matter for that future.

Consider the savings rate in our country.
People in America today just are not saving enough money for the future.
We can't seem to stop spending on the present.
Or we're bogged down paying for what we bought yesterday.

So we have these savings plans that are supposed to help us think about 'the long-run.'
There's the 529 college saving plan, and the 401K retirement plan.
These plans keep our eyes looking out into the future, beyond our present impulses.

Of course, those of you who have already sent your kids to college,
or are sending them now,
and those of you who have already retired,
or are well beyond retirement,
know just how quickly we reach those horizons,
that once seemed so far away.
You know that they are not quite as 'long-term' as you once thought.

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The Book of Revelation is meant to lift our eyes beyond the horizon,
to see out beyond the short-term – way, way out!
Revelation takes our vision beyond the years of history
and deals with numbers even more astronomical than the price of college tuition.
We see a multitude standing before God's heavenly throne
a multitude so great *that no one could count.*
from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.
This great multitude stands before the throne of God,
and they are waving palm branches in their hands as signs of victory
They cry out
Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!
Who are they? We are told
These are they who have come out of the great ordeal;
they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.
They have been through some incredible time of trial, some final test of faith,

which was a matter life or death.
And now they stand in the presence of God because they have persevered
through this time of trial, this great ordeal
without forsaking their allegiance to the Lamb,
without turning away from their only Savior, Jesus Christ.

They now gather with all the saints and rejoice in God's new world.
They will hunger no more, and thirst no more,
and *the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat*
(nor for that matter, we might assume, any icy wind or driving snow!)
they will now *drink from the springs of the water of life*
and *God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*

I wonder what our lives would be like if we could live with our eyes set on this horizon?
The perfect glory and joy of God's new world!
I wouldn't want to take the imagery too literally.
As a young child once pointed out to me,
sitting on a cloud, with hymnbook in hand,
singing page after page in never ending church,
might get pretty boring after a while.
What is portrayed here, as I interpret it, is human life lived at its fullest
and in perfect accord with its truest purpose,
which is the pure enjoyment of God's presence
and the sheer ecstasy of human life untarnished by any kind of suffering.
For my daughter, for instance, such life would include galloping a horse bareback
through an unending prairie, and singing to God the whole time.
For my wife, it would probably be digging in the dirt all day,
planting and then delighting in a garden that lives and blooms and grows,
where the rabbits will not break in a steal, and the deer will not consume.

I wonder what our lives would be like if we could set our eye on this horizon?
How utterly would it change our lives, to envision eternal life in God's new world?
Would it bring the utmost assurance, and the deepest peace
or a sense of restlessness with this world,
that will not let you accept the way things are?
Maybe both, if that's possible.

Living in the assurance of God's good future,
and knowing that there is a truer reality beyond the circumstances of our present world,
is, I think, what Jesus was getting at when he said,
My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.
I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.
No one will snatch them out of my hand.

When we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, and learn to trust his voice,
our relationship to this world is changed.

We begin, right then, in the moment of trust, to live eternal life.
Eternal life is not just something we experience after death.
It begins the moment we believe.

It becomes real, the moment we hear the voice of our Shepherd.
Believing in Jesus is not just about having a ticket into the Great Beyond.
Believing in Jesus is about living eternally, *now*.

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Our common worship is full of moments
when we can hear the voice of the Good Shepherd,
and trusting in his voice, have eternal life:

The Lord's Supper is one such moment – it is the quintessential moment for us
to hear and trust the voice of the Good Shepherd.
Here we share a joyful feast with the risen Christ,
celebrating his victory over death and the life he has secured for us.
Here we find that, in Christ, we have already died. The worst is behind us.
Now we cling to Christ as we look forward
to the great feast we will share with Christ with that great multitude
in God's everlasting kingdom.

And in just a moment,
we will commission and ask God's blessing on a group of our members,
who will go, on our behalf, to bear witness to Christ our Savior.
People who have heard the voice of the Good Shepherd
do things like go on mission trips.
They have perceived the glory of God's future, and by that vision
are set free in the present
to love, and to serve, and to give generously of themselves
for the sake of God's world.

Eternal life. It is more than a ticket into heaven when you die.
It begins today,
when you hear the voice of the Good Shepherd,
and know that it is *your name* he calls.