

THE ULTIMATE "I" EXAM

Sermon, January 5, 2020

Text: II Timothy 4:1-8

As I age, my New Year's resolutions have become fewer ... I think I can say I basically have two. The first is this: As I'm nearly half way into my sixty-sixth orbit around the sun, I am trying very hard to take to heart the adage: "**AGE LIKE FINE WINE, NOT LIKE VINEGAR.**" I want to age well; I want to age gracefully ... both for my sake, and for the sake of anyone who has to socialize and/or put up with me. Wine that doesn't age well becomes vinegar ... sour, bitter, unpalatable vinegar ... and a common cause of that is when the cork is not put on tight during the bottling. "**AGE LIKE FINE WINE, NOT LIKE VINEGAR.**" ... I'm convinced the first step at succeeding in doing that in life has a whole lot to do with keeping the cork on tight over my W-H-I-N-E, my complaining, my grumbling, my cynical and less than constructive words. When any WHINE starts to leak out of our lips, put a cork on it! "Age like fine wine, not like vinegar."

That's Resolution One.

Resolution Two is this: Especially in this year 2020, a number always associated with clear vision, I want to prepare to pass the ultimate "I" exam, pun intended. What is the ultimate "I" exam? We just read it this morning. When Paul wrote his second epistle to his young protégé Timothy, Paul was in prison, very soon to be executed by the Romans, and I think he knew it. Like any man approaching the end, be it the end of a year or the end of a life, Paul reflects back and makes an examination of what he has done. It is in this context that he writes, "*The time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.*" ("*I, I, I!*") Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not saying I'm at the end of my life, here ... I haven't finished my race ... at least, I hope not! But as I age, my resolve is to pass this ultimate "I" exam that basically has just one question. "*What have I done with my life?*" I want to be able to say with Paul and to say it with integrity, "*I have fought the good fight. I have finished my course. I have kept the faith.*"

I want to age well, and I want to end well.

So, here we are, the first Sunday of 2020! It was twenty years ago we were all worried about Y2K and the beginning of a new millennium! For some of us, doesn't it seem like just yesterday? On the other hand, in some respects it seems like a lifetime ago ... and especially for anyone in their teen years or younger, it was a lifetime ago! 2015 was five years ago ... for you movie buffs, you know 2015 was the year Marty McFly and Professor Emmett Brown traveled TO in **Back to the Future II** (*a movie that came out in 1989*). Going to 2015 certainly isn't going Back to the Future now! And here we are seven years and three weeks after the Mayan calendar told us the world would be no more, for the Mayan calendar predicted the world would end December 21, 2012. The Mayans are gone, but we're still here! On the New Year's Eve we welcomed 1998 ... again, not all that long ago ... my daughter Hannah took her first steps. And it was January 1997 that I baptized a baby organist right here in front of this chancel ... and I'll be conducting his wedding next Saturday in front of this same chancel! (*For those who don't know, our Director of Music John Black was my very first infant baptism here in this church; he will be married to Olivia Vicente this coming Saturday.*) The older we get, the faster time seems to fly ... as my dad used to joke, everything picks up speed when you are heading downhill. There are now just 350 days until next Christmas ... that may seem like an eternity when you are six, but when you are sixty and above, a year seems like no time at all; Christmas will be here before you know it!

It was Albert Einstein who introduced us to the concept of the relativity of time, the concept of time dilation. According to this theory, as I understand it (*and it's much more involved than I will attempt to explain here*) the faster you go, the more time slows down. If we could travel speeds approaching the speed of light, if we could somehow keep pace with the speed of light, time would "slow down." As I understand it, the principle "*Moving clocks run slow*" is a key to beginning to understand time space relativity. (*So, maybe when we stop being as active, time speeds up? I don't know ... sounds plausible!*)¹ I'm still working on a related theological theory of my own ... keep in mind I barely squeaked by in Physics 101 in college ... but I believe there may be something of a theological theory of relativity. The more we "approach" the Light of the world, the closer we come to the Light, the more we keep pace with the Light, **the more we walk in the Light** ... the more we see time and

¹ This reference might help summarize <https://www.sciencealert.com/watch-the-famous-twin-paradox-of-special-relativity-explained>

space and everything in it *differently*; the more we see the things of this temporal world from a different perspective. I mean, there are some concepts that are just beyond our finite mind's ability to grasp, but I'm thinking there may be some connection with the timelessness of eternity and the Kingdom of Light and Einstein's theories of relativity ... but like I said, I'm still working on all this!

Paul had certainly walked in the light, AND he saw everything accordingly from that light perspective! He persevered; he had indeed fought the good fight, he had kept the faith, which throughout his thirteen epistles he had encouraged all his readers to do. The same Paul who wrote Timothy also wrote to the church in Philippi, *"But I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."* Throughout his letters, Paul calls Christians to persevere, to fight the good fight, to keep the faith.

For three decades, Paul traveled throughout the Roman Empire, preaching, teaching, debating, proclaiming this faith and establishing churches. That's thirty years of living on the cutting edge of the Christian movement. Thirty years filled with success and failure, thirty years filled with popularity and persecution, thirty years filled with joy and grief. In thirty years Paul learned something of what it takes to keep going when the going gets tough. In thirty years Paul learned something of what it takes to hold on to his faith when there seems to be every reason to give up in despair, while others around him frequently did just that. In thirty years he learned something of what it takes to cling to his faith and convictions while others were doing their best to pry his faith and convictions away from him. In thirty years he learned something of what it takes to be a faithful soldier to the end, when others around him all too quickly had abandoned the battle.

Again, it's in this context he writes, *"In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of His appearing and His kingdom, I give you this charge. Preach the Word, be prepared in season and out of season, correct, rebuke and encourage ... with great patience and careful instruction."* Paul goes on to caution, *"Timothy, a time will come when people will not always listen to sound doctrine; instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths."*

For Paul, the Christian faith is not a myth. It is a true story that needs to be told and retold and lived and put into practice. The Christian faith makes the unique claim that God entered history by becoming human. For Paul, everything ... EVERYTHING ... needs to be looked at in the **light** of the historical reality of what we just celebrated at Christmas, that God appeared in human flesh. He wrote. *"In the presence of God and of Jesus who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of His appearing and His kingdom, I give you this charge."* In short, Paul's criteria for discerning what is right and good, Paul's criteria for the sort of things we should give "ear" to, is this: *"Is this consistent with what we know about God as revealed in Jesus Christ?"* In other words, is this what Jesus, who is God in the flesh and the Light of the World, is this what Jesus, who really entered human history, would say is true? Is this what Jesus would say is good? Is this what Jesus would say is right? Is this what Jesus would do ... and if not, why in the world am I contemplating doing it?! This is how we become people of light; this is how we are to discern right from wrong, truth from falsehood, light from darkness, good from bad. This is how we see things differently ... from a Light (*right*) perspective.

By the way, when Paul writes *"in view of his appearing,"* the Greek word translated "appearing" is *epiphaneon*, from which we get the word Epiphany ... which basically means *"appearance, revelation."* Tomorrow we commemorate Epiphany, when the Light of the World was revealed to the Gentiles, as personified by the Magi visiting the Christ child. This Light wasn't meant just for a religious corner of the world in the Middle East, this Light was meant for the whole world. Everything Paul believed and taught was given in view of, in *light* of, the very real God who became one of us! That was Paul's criteria for discerning truth. Is this what Jesus, who is God in the flesh and the Light of the World, would say is good? Is this what Jesus, who really entered human history, would say is true? Is this what Jesus would say is right? Is this what Jesus would do? And in the end, when he examined his life, Paul could say with confidence and integrity that he passed the ultimate "I" exam ... *"I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith."*

On this first communion Sunday of 2020, I'd like to call attention to an "I Examination Chart" posted in the church each and every Sunday. See the letters on this Table. "THIS DO IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME." Those were Jesus' words on the night He was betrayed; let us resolve to apply them in *everything* we do in life ... "THIS I DO, THIS I SAY, THIS I'LL THINK ... IN VIEW AND REMEMBRANCE OF MY LORD JESUS CHRIST." A standard which, faithfully kept, will enable us to age well and end well ... good resolutions for a 2020 year!