

Who Are You and Where Are You Going?

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Dr. John Huffman, St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Newport Beach, California

Sunday, July 16, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

What a sacred privilege it is to be back here in the pulpit of National Presbyterian Church. I feel a great oneness with you, as I have been privileged to have, as friends, a number of your pastors through the years—going all the way back to Dr. Elson, and Louis and Coke Evans. I worked with Bryant Kirkland of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church during my senior year at Princeton; I know how much you loved him. Also Craig Barnes, and Tom Erickson—I knew him back when he was fresh out of seminary, and I was in seminary when he was ministering in Boston—and now Gareth and Vida. Vida and I served together on the board of World Vision, for many years. But I am going to dismiss nostalgia, as we are here to preach the word of the Lord, and not get too caught up in the past. I would like to focus on two questions this morning. The first question: Who are you? Who am I? The second question: Where are you going? Where am I going? As the G-8 meets in St. Petersburg...as the missiles fly southward and northward out of Israel...to Gaza....the route to southern Lebanon... Haifa...Tiberius...we are bored, although pained, with all the word we have had from Iraq for years. And all of this fresh new activity at one level excites us and stimulates, and at the same time grieves us, as we see the tragedies of the world. And yet, ultimately, it boils down to who we are, and where we are going. Some years ago, in the mid-1990's, the late Henri Nouwen, a writer very much respected by many of us, was lecturing to a group of clergymen at a national conference. He turned and, on some newsprint, wrote the date 1932. Then he drew a line all way to the right of the page, to the year 2010, and he said, "Life at the longest is short. There is my life span." He indicated his expected lifespan from the year 1932, actuarially, to the year 2010—never dreaming that within a few weeks from the time he put that on the newsprint and made that statement, he would be dead. About the time that I saw the video of that conference, I was driving from a golf game and heard on the CBS hourly news that a Lear jet had taken off from Orlando airport headed for Dallas. It had missed its vector, and was moving to the northwestern part of the United States. On it was rumored to be one of the top golfers in the United States; and you remember as, in suspended animation, we waited to hear what had happened. Finally, a couple of farmers out hunting in a field, observed this bird come out of the air and dive into the cornfield; and Payne Stewart and a number of his colleagues were dead. About the same time I was musing on what Nouwen had said on life and death, and I got to thinking of my own daughter. When I last preached here, she was a sophomore at Princeton University, in the prime of life, with great enthusiasm. In 1987, in February of her senior year, she was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease. She was determined to graduate—and she did—taking outpatient chemotherapy at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. She wore a turban on her bald head. She had the finest medical care: radiation at Stanford. A year later the disease recurred. There was a 90 percent cure factor when first diagnosed; but a year later, four percent. She died 19 months after the diagnosis, at age 23—driving home to me, existentially, that the reality of life, at the longest, is short. "Three score years and ten; and if, by labor and sorrow, fourscore years..." the scripture says; but for some of us shorter than that. And I wrote down some statistics here: from a practical standpoint, actuarially, Payne Stewart's life was cut some 36 years short; Nouwen's life was 15 years short; and our Suzanne's was some 55 years short of what the U.S. actuarial statistics would say. It's important to understand who we are, isn't it? If you are at a dinner party and you are meeting someone for the first time, it's easy to turn to the other person and say, "What do you do?" Some of us define ourselves by what we do: I am what I do. I am the pastor of a church in southern California. You may be a lawyer and work for the government; you may be a housewife; you may be a teacher. God knows what you do, and we often define ourselves so quickly by what we do. The question may arise, "What if I no longer do what I do as well as I used to do it?" Or, "What if I no longer do what I did, and I can no longer identify myself by what I do? I am what I do." What does that mean for those years that some call 'retirement,' where we are distanced from what we did at our prime? Some of us did very well what we do, and received much greater recognition for it at other times in our lives, than we do now. Are we any less? 'I am what I do.' I think it falls a bit short, doesn't it? Some would say, "I am what people say about me." Well, some of us appreciate the good things people say about us. Most of us remember, though, the bad things people say about us. And many of us, who have had anything written about us in the press, can have ten favorable articles, but one negative. We tend to remember the negative. My wife is a psychoanalyst; she does her work with people who are, at mid-life, working through issues created by things said about them, and attitudes expressed toward them, early in life: the put-down; the over-bearing parent; the friends who said things about you that you still remember. You may be a decade...or three...or four away from it...but you still remember, don't you? I do. I'll not bore you with the memories I have.

One of my friends said he has a friend who is the chairman of the math department at one of the finest universities in the United States—who thinks she is dumb. Why? She came home from school and showed her Dad her math test. She got a 95 on it, and he said, "What? Are you, dumb or something? Why didn't you get 100?" She worked really hard, and a few weeks later came back with another math test on which she had gotten 100. Her father said, "It must have been an easy test." He was urging her on, but whittling away at her self-esteem. Imagine being the chairman of the math department of a major American university and thinking you're dumb. But that's the way we are, is it not? I am what people say about me. Some of us go through life (because we have parents who thought we were so great) and we can't understand why the rest of the world doesn't say those kinds of things about us! The third response would be: "I am what I have." The one with the most toys left wins. Really? I have had many memorial services for some of the poorest people in the world, and some of the wealthiest people in the world. And I have found that, in the casket, they are accompanied by the same amount of their material possessions. There are no pockets in the shrouds, are there? A year ago, I carried this clipping with me; I was so impressed with it. John Walton, 58, billionaire heir to the Wal-Mart fortune... plane crash. Wealthiest person in the world, worth \$18.2 billion; and in a moment, he was gone, as far as this life is concerned.

And then, if I evaluate myself on what I do or what people say about me, or what I have, how do we deal with the Down Syndrome child who never even gets a head start in any of those? How do we deal with persons with dementia or Alzheimer's and the awesome specter of some of us, who have been blessed with success in human terms in life, and have watched our parents go through that? I have been wrestling with this. It's interesting, if you would track what I have preached on at National Presbyterian Church from my first times here in the early 1970's, now to age 66, you will find that my sermons age with me – a kind of progression of thought and

life experience.

Ann and I are the only people I know who had two parents living in their 90's. But now that's changed; her Dad and my Dad have both died in the past couple of years. Tonight I'll be with my Mom – as sharp as can be – in Chicago. In recent years, I have been thinking about my Dad, and the dementia that he experienced. I watched him change to where he could not recognize me. And I watched my mother, as she would talk to my Dad every afternoon about memories of the past; she didn't know if it was registering, or not. And I began to think of my middle daughter, who graduated from M.I.T. with her M.B.A. when I was at Microsoft. Here was this person who was at the peak of her young career... and here I am, coming to the last years of my active ministry... and Dad, drifting toward dementia, and ultimately death, a couple of years ago. And to think of how he was – his arms so strong, as he held our middle daughter. Ann and I stood before him in that service of baptism where he claimed the covenant promises of God for that helpless little one...who now is the strongest of us all. Where will I be in 25 years? 30 years? God only knows. The Apostle Paul is wrestling with that kind of stuff in the 11th and 12th chapters of 2 Corinthians- the passage Caitlin read so eloquently for us. We could have read the whole text, where he talks about the sufferings of life: the beatings, and the shipwrecks; exposure to hunger, and thirst, and cold, and heat. In the passage she read, he talks about a thorn in the flesh that was given to him by Satan, with which he struggled. And three times he cried out for God's deliverance. Now, we don't know what that thorn in the flesh was. Some would say it was an ophthalmological problem (an eye disease). Some have speculated that it was malaria fever that he contracted during his first missionary journey, traveling along the southern coast of what is contemporary Turkey, in the swamplands. Some have said it was epilepsy. And others – the Roman Catholics – have said that perhaps he struggled with some kind of sexual temptation that just had him in its clutches. Paul was struggling with that, wanting God's deliverance. We don't know what it was, but we do know that he had an enormous sense of weakness—this high achiever; this major accomplisher who fits every category of our standards—"I am what I do;" "I am what people say about me;" "I am what I have." He was an A-Type personality who certainly accomplished an awful lot, did he not? And yet he comes to the conclusion, in the final analysis: the Lord says to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions and difficulties; for when I am weak, then I am strong." I love the way your Minister of Music put together the worship this morning; every phrase ties in to what we're talking about. What the choir sang – those words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer – take them home; ponder them. I'll not read them all to you, but, "...we know that God is with us, night and morning. And never fails to greet us each new day." And then he talks about the night time of life: "...the bitter suffering—we take it thankfully, without trembling, out of so good and so beloved a hand." And then the good things of life: "...yet when again, in this same world you give us the joy we had, the brightness of your sun, we shall remember all the days we lived through, and our whole life shall then be yours alone."

One of my favorite writers is the late Paul Tournier – a gifted man, a psychiatrist. He's known for many books; the one that is my favorite is hardest to get hold of (it's out-of-print), entitled, *The Strong and the Weak*. The thesis of the book is that there are two kinds of pathologies, or at least neuroses, of life: one is neurosis of weakness (We get counseling for those of us who struggle with that, and the depression that comes from that.) But he said there is also a neurosis of strength—as much a neurosis as the neurosis of weakness. He says that,

If weakness leads to a sense of failure, strength too has its vicious circle: one must go on being strong and stronger for fear of suffering and even more crushing defeat. And this race in strength leads humanity inevitably to general collapse." And then he says, "I believe there is a great illusion underlying both the despair of the weak, and the unease of the strong, and the misfortune of both. This great illusion is the very notion that there are two kinds of human beings—the strong and the weak. The truth is that human beings are much more alike than they think. What is different is the external mask—sparkling or disagreeable; the outward reaction—strong or weak. These appearances, however, hide an identical inner personality. The external mask, the outward reaction deceive everybody, the strong as well as the weak. All persons, in fact, are weak. All are weak, because all are afraid. They are all afraid of being trampled under foot. They are all afraid of their inner weaknesses being discovered. [As a pastor, you discover the dark side of each person, as well as the admirable side. We all have that, do we not?] They all have secret faults. They all have a bad conscience on account of certain acts that they would like to keep covered up. They are all afraid of other persons...and of God... of themselves...of life...and of death.

Who are you? Who am I? The bottom line is to see myself as a sinner saved by God's grace, his unmerited favor—one with some strengths... and with some weaknesses. Some who will be at the top of my game in what I do, at times; and other times, not so good a job. One who some people may say some good things about me at times, but also some pretty negative things. And some times of abundance, and some times of want and insecurity...and to see myself as accepted in the Beloved. I am tempted by those three, and other seductive identifications for myself; but I need to remind myself daily that I am a child of God's, accepted in the Beloved. "For my grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in your weakness," the Lord says. Who are you? The second question is: Where are you going? How do you get this theme wrestled through? The best I know how to do it is tell a story with two parts to it. The year was the year 2000. Dr. Billy Graham had been invited back to Charlotte, his home city, for a luncheon in his honor. He had refused the invitation; he felt it was inappropriate to be honored in that way. They would ask for a speech; he was getting older; and some of us have seen him in recent days, quite frail. They said, "Please come, we want to honor you." He said, "But you'll ask me to speak." "Well, yes," they replied, "you'll have to say something, but you don't have to give a formal speech." Finally, he reluctantly agreed. His sister, Jeannie, related this story to me. He went, and they had this wonderful luncheon with all the accolades you would expect for this person; and then they looked to him to say something. He made his way, very feebly, to the rostrum, and he said, "I would like to share with you two things. First, it is told that Albert Einstein was on a train from Princeton to an engagement and the conductor came down the aisle of the train, punching the tickets. He looked at the Nobel Prize winner, the man who this month was declared to be the Man of the Century by Time magazine, (parenthetically, Walter Isaacson, who is working on a biography of him right now, in this week's Time, has some very interesting excerpts from that forthcoming biography) and the conductor reached for the ticket. Einstein fumbled for it, and couldn't find it in one pocket. He checked another, then looked in his briefcase and fumbled through, but he couldn't find it. The conductor said, "Dr. Einstein, I recognize you. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry. I trust you." The conductor continued on his way. He came to the end of the car; and as he was moving through the door to the next car, he looked back and saw the most amazing sight: there was the great physicist, on his hands and knees, looking for the ticket under the seat. The conductor rushed back and said, "Dr. Einstein, I told you, I know who you are. Don't worry about it." Dr. Einstein looked

up and said, "I, too, know who I am. But I don't know where I am going."

Then Dr. Graham said, "See this suit I am wearing? It's a brand new suit. My wife, my children, my grandchildren, and even a couple of my great-grandchildren have told me I'm getting a bit slovenly in dress in my elder years. I used to give quite a bit of attention to it. But I went out and bought a brand new suit for this occasion, and one other—for this luncheon...and for my funeral. It's a good suit. But when you hear that I have died, I don't want you to remember that I am dressed in this suit. What I want you to remember is: that I know who I am—a child of God's, accepted in the Beloved, embraced by the crucified and risen Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit; and I know where I am going—into the presence of the One who said 'I go to prepare a place for you'."

Who are you? Where are you going? Let me conclude with two little comments here. A man in my congregation whom I did not know well, died. I had seen him at civic events around Newport Beach for a number of years and noticed, in the last several years, that he had started attending our Saturday night contemporary service. He was a well-known person in the society world and in golf, and I was quite surprised, actually, to see him in church. He would greet me occasionally at the door, but most often he slipped out very quietly. He sat in the very back row. When he died, his three daughters came to my study and we planned the memorial service together. They asked me to read a note they found in their father's day planner:

Dear God, I admit that I am a sinner. I am sorry for my sins. Please forgive me and save me. I ask this in the name of Jesus who died for me. I trust him right now. I believe that the sinless blood of Jesus is sufficient to pay for my salvation. Thank you for hearing me. Thank you for saving my soul.

I began to weep, because every so often I gave an invitation to pray a prayer like that and, obviously, he had heard that invitation given by me or some other person, and had sealed who he was and where he was going with this commitment.

A while ago I was rifling through some books in my study that I had not looked at before. One was an autobiography written by my grandfather, a wonderful man. He had given it to me, but you know how grandkids are: when your parents and grandparents write things, you put off reading them. I had never opened it before. But when I opened it and was browsing through it, I found this letter. He had given a copy to each of his grandchildren:

To my very good friend, this brief note is addressed to you, a relative or special non-relative friend to whom I am presenting a copy of my book of memoirs. It may be presumptuous, on my part, to assume you would be interested in the book, but I desire you to know that I have only one motive in preparing the volume and in presenting to you this copy, which is: the glory of God. To this end, I do pray. Here is recounted the story of what God did for, and through, a country boy who found the way of Christian discipleship early, and followed-through. There is only one secret to my life, and that secret is Christ. The faith of my life has been simple. It is reflected in my espoused doctrine and my Christian experience and my practice. My Christian experience, as such, has been at no time spectacular, but it has held me. I am not a self-made, but a grace-made man. I expect to come into God's presence when he calls me, with not only the worst of my life, but the best of it, under the precious atoning blood of Christ. Sincerely, His and yours, Jasper A. Huffman.

At age 66, I am not sure I will ever preach from this pulpit again. Therefore, I just want to ask the questions: Who are you? Where are you going?

Dear God, may we be honest in answering these two questions, and claiming your answers—not just academic, but existential—that we know who we are: your child, accepted in the Beloved—and where we are going in this life, and the life to come. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.