

February 24, 2019

Sermon Series: 24

“Emphasis On the THIS”

Psalm 118:24, Exodus 16:1-35

How many of you like to play games? Board games or card games?

What are some of your very favorite games?

We love everything from the classic UNO and Yahtzee to a card game called Pay Me to the more recent Ticket to Ride, Settlers, and Carcazone. I noticed nobody mentioned two particular games everyone I know has played – and keeps playing throughout life. You may know a slightly different version of these two games but one of them is called Looking Back. You have to be a little older to play this game. In the game of Looking Back you need to keep saying, “I remember when.” [I remember when: life was more simple, we had more money, Grand Junction was smaller, I knew all my neighbors, everyone was home for Christmas, my body wasn’t so sore, mom and dad were still married, we were in the prime of our lives] The other thing people say in Looking Back is “If only.” [If only: I hadn’t majored in Philosophy/Business, I had married someone else, I had gone to the doctor sooner, I had developed a biblical understanding of finances earlier, I hadn’t spent all of my bonus at once, I hadn’t said that to my sibling/parent/child, I could have a ‘Do Over.’]

The other game everyone plays regularly is called Looking Forward. You can start playing this game much younger. You know you’re in the middle of a game of Looking Forward when you keep hearing two different, but oft-repeated phrases: “I can’t wait until” and “It’s going to be better when.” [I can’t wait until: I can stay up later, get my driver’s license, go to college, get a job, get married, get a real job, get a better job, have kids, the kids get out of diapers, we can go on a real vacation, I can retire **(OR)** It’s going to be better when: we pay off the mortgage, we get past this rough patch in our marriage, we have more square footage (and have a bigger mortgage?), I lose 20 pounds, our schedule is less crazy, I don’t have to follow my parents’ rules anymore]

The games of Looking Back and Looking Forward take up a LOT of our time. We can play either of these games for hours, days, even years at a time. But the Psalmist declares, “THIS is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.” (Psalm 118:24) Our God is a very present-tense God; and He loves to play with us in the game called TODAY, THIS Day.

Pastor and author, Jeff Schreve points out “No matter how many days God gives us, He gives them to us one day at a time. So when you think about it . . . today is all we have.” (*Runaway Emotions*)

After rescuing His people from slavery in Egypt God came up with a great strategy for teaching the Israelites how to live present-tense lives. He reminded them that “His steadfast love endures forever” (Psalm 118:1-4, 29) every single morning when they woke up. He gave them the right amount of manna/bread each and every day; one 24-hour day at a time. Of course, they still played some Looking Back and, understandably, did a lot of Looking Forward to the Promised Land, but God kept at it – helping them start each day with strong evidence that He was present and at work; that He would be taking care of them from sun-up to sundown.

I’m guessing Jesus, who introduced Himself as Manna/Bread from Heaven in John’s Gospel, must have had the Exodus in mind when (in His Sermon on the Mount) He taught us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” (Matthew 6:11) The Israelites were told to gather enough manna for each day, but no more – except right before the Sabbath. Storing up extra manna for the week ahead never went well, not because God couldn’t figure out how to add preservatives, but because He wanted His people to be present-tense people who were filled with trust, gladness, and rejoicing.

He knew that trusting Him meant playing less Looking Back or Looking Forward. We can look back with gratitude and look forward with hope, and both can be good things. However, the usual mood or state of mind while playing those two games is regret (in Looking Back) and worry (in Looking Forward). And carrying around a bunch of regret and worry is no way to live. God knew how unproductive and joy-stealing worry could be for us, so He provided manna every day and declared He’d do the same thing once tomorrow became today, all the way to the Promised Land. They had no idea it would take 40 years to get all the way around the board, but that also meant a whole generation of Israelites got to discover afresh that “THIS is the day the Lord has made.” Over time, they unlearned slavery and worry. Sort of . . .

When Jesus arrived centuries later He could see that God’s people still struggled to live trusting, joyful, present-tense lives. A little later in His Sermon on the Mount He said, “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” (Matthew 6:34)

James, who many believe was the brother of Jesus, reiterated the same message to those in the early Church. “And now I have a word for you who brashly announce, ‘Today – at the latest tomorrow – we’re off to such and such a city for the year. We’re going to start a business and make a lot of money.’ You don’t know the first thing about tomorrow. You’re nothing but a wisp of fog, catching a brief bit of sun before disappearing. Instead, make it a habit to say, ‘If the Master wills it, and we’re still alive, we’ll do this or that.’” (James 4:13-15 in The Message)

This is an important distinction: Jesus and James, and God through Moses never said we shouldn't think about or make plans for the future. But they kept reminding those who were willing to identify as God's particular and peculiar people to be clear that tomorrow may not happen – and then act and speak and plan accordingly. God's Present-Tense way of thinking and feeling and living has significant implications. If we truly buy into God's understanding and approach to time, such belief should inform how we talk about the future; how loosely we hold on to our stuff and to our plans; how often we get anxious; how demanding we are of others; the level of complaint in our lives; how disappointed we get when tomorrow doesn't end up the way we envisioned it would . . . or find out there might not be a tomorrow – for a job, a relationship, or a life . . . including our own life.

“THIS is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.” (Psalm 118:24) A lot can happen in 24 hours, if we really live it in the present-tense and refuse to play Looking Back or Looking Forward. We can do a LOT of rejoicing and being glad.

So what do you have to “REJOICE and BE GLAD” about TODAY? How will you and I spend less time Looking Back and Forward? How can we live with more joy and gladness, less regret and worry.

What is there to say TODAY? (to God, to another person)

[Text, email, phone call, face-to-face conversation]

What is there to discover TODAY? (about God, yourself, someone else)

Next week we are going wrap up this series and look at Ephesians 5, which tells us “to make the best use of our time.” Why wait? Why not do THIS day what God is calling us to do?

Isn't it interesting that God includes the command to keep some of the manna in a jar? “This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Take an omer of manna and keep it for generations to come, so they can see the bread I gave you to eat in the desert when I brought you out of Egypt.’ ” (Exodus 16:32)

What did they need to remember? “His steadfast love endures forever.” (Psalm 118:1-4, 29) Maybe you need a jar; or a picture or a painting or an entry in your journal or a song or a friend (or something else) to remind you that “His steadfast love endures forever.”

And if “THIS is the day that the Lord has made” and it's also true that “His steadfast love endures forever,” then no matter how many more days God gives us, He will – along with each day's joys and challenges, victories and defeats, surprises and predictable, mundane activities – [He will] rain down His steadfast love on us like sweet manna as we wake up to each new day. And THIS is reason enough to REJOICE and BE GLAD!