

Perfect Moments

As CEO at the accounting giant KPMG, Eugene O'Kelly was so immersed in his job that over the course of a decade, he managed to have lunch with his wife on weekdays just twice, and his travel schedule was set 18 months out.

Once, he was so obsessed with impressing a potential client that he tracked down the man's travel schedule, booked the seat next to him on a flight, schmoozed the guy all the way to Australia, landed the account, and flew immediately back to Manhattan.

His Type-A ways vanished when, at age 53, a top neurosurgeon in New York told him he had late-stage brain cancer.

Eugene said, "His eyes told me I would die soon. It was late spring. I had seen my last autumn in New York."

The doctor proceeded to tell him he had 100 days to live.

A wonderful high achiever. He did what it took to be successful in business.

And it all came to an end with that doctor's visit.

What do you do when you receive such devastating news – 100 days to live?

What do you have to look forward to?

The scripture Hoyle read for us at the beginning of our Worship Service was from the Book of Daniel which was written during a time the Israelites didn't have anything to look forward to as well.

Israel had turned their back from God so God allowed them to be beaten by their enemies, taken from their land and placed in a foreign country.

They were being assimilated into the culture of the Babylonians. It looked like the end for the Jews and their religion, and their way of life.

But that didn't make sense. God had made a covenant – an unbreakable agreement – that the Jews would never – ever – be wiped out.

So this was a time of despair for the Jews. Possibly, probably, the end of their faith, and the end of their lives as they knew it. What did they have to look forward to?

Not unlike us today.

What can we say at the end of an awful year of gruesome news? Rapes, murders, wars, terrorist threats and terrorist activities, natural disasters. Instead of prices as the gas pumps next to REGULAR and PREMIUM, it now reads, an ARM or a LEG.

The bad news doesn't stop.

Besides the terrible things happening around the world, we are also seeing Christianity being chiseled away by our own country that was founded on the premise of religious freedom.

The Ten Commandments are being taken out of the court houses, nativity scenes removed from city property, no more Christmas Vacations, but instead we have Holiday Break – Christmas Trees have been renamed Holiday Trees and in many ways, it seems like any religion can be publicly discussed except Christianity.

One might ask, with all of this going on, What do we have to look forward to?

After he was diagnosed with brain cancer, Eugene O’Kelly asked himself – what did he have to look forward to. And he decided – Perfect Moments. A good meal. A meaningful conversation. A lovely afternoon in the park. Perfect moments.

When he was diagnosed, Eugene said that he had been focused on building and planning for the future. Now, he said, he would have to learn the true value of the present.

There are many things I would probably do if I found out I only had 100 days left to live. But writing a book probably wouldn’t be one of them. But that is what Gene did. He wrote a book.

What amazes me more than anything is the first 2 sentences in his book. They read, “I was blessed. I was told I had three months left to live.”

How could anyone put, “I was blessed and then I was told I had three months left to live” as back to back sentences?

Those two sentences don’t belong together. Not in the same chapter, not in the same paragraph and definitely back to back.

But that is where he put them.

And here is why – this is an excerpt from his book –

“Because I was forced to think seriously about my own death. Which meant I was forced to think more deeply about my life than I’d ever done.

Unpleasant as it was, I forced myself to acknowledge that I was in the final stage of life, forced myself to decide how to spend my last 100 days..., forced myself to act on those decisions.

In short, I asked myself to answer two questions: Must the end of life be the worst part? And, Can it be made a constructive experience – even the best part of life?”

Through his book we learn that he goes searching for “Perfect Moments” – times of lingering over a fine meal, enjoying a long and deep conversation, taking the time to soak up the beauty of nature over the course of an afternoon.

In his book he wrote, “I marveled at how many Perfect Moments I was having now.”

Gene O’Kelly didn’t have much time, so he had to get it right. In many ways he did, by turning what most of us would consider “ordinary experiences” into “Perfect Moments”.

True to his CEO style, he created goals for himself, made lists of friends to visit for the last time; he meditated; he tried to create as many "Perfect Moments" that he could. He realized how few and rare those moments were during his “previous life” as a corporate CEO.

Then Gene O’Kelly died. Just like the doctors had predicted.

There are no TV-movie-style miracle treatments or extensions of his life expectancy; he was told he had 3 months, and he didn’t spend any energy hoping for a cure.

A lot of times we don’t like to talk about it, but the end is coming for every one of us, but so often we behave as though we are going to live forever.

So what does it mean for us to live with the end in mind, and learn the true value of the present?

Our Christian faith is full of reminders that life has a start and a finish. It is also grounded in the conviction that our lives have meaning from the beginning to the end.

Beginnings and ends. Even our church year begins on the first Sunday of Advent – which is next Sunday – and then moves through celebrations of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus until we get to the last Sunday of the church year, which is today – called Christ the King Sunday.

But how do we find meaning and a purposeful progression in a year marked by such discouraging news? How do we break out of the day-to-day despair and catch sight of a Perfect Moment?

I feel that for us, people of faith, the best way to clarify the present is to focus on the future.

That’s precisely what the Israelites ended up doing during the time the Book of Daniel was written.

See, Daniel discovers hope for the present by focusing on the end. Lying in bed in Babylon, he has a vision of God, the “Ancient One” who takes his place on a throne that is blazing with fiery flames.

God’s clothing is as white as snow, the hair of his head is like pure wool, and a stream of fire flows out from his presence.

And then he sees, “one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven.” A human being appears, and to this son of man God gives “dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.”

This was a prophecy of Jesus Christ – The Messiah – The Savior – 600 years before he was born.

For Daniel, and for all who have faith in God, this is a Perfect Moment.

And it was a way for God to show that he is working to bring order out of chaos and victory out of defeat.

No matter how bad things get or how hard it confronts us on CBS, CNN, ABC – or from Rush Limbaugh, God IS working with God’s people today, just as he did with Daniel, to ensure that HIS will is done “on earth, as it is in heaven.”

This, and other prophecies, gave the exiles in Babylon hope – hope of something better to come at the end. We can look at this as well with the other passage Hoyle read for us from the Book of Revelation, which was written by John 60 years after Jesus died. And it contains information about the end times for us. Hope.

The passages in Daniel and those in Revelation show us that “Christ will come in the end times as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He is the ruler of the kings of the earth and He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, every knee will bow.”

The Israelites living in exile in Babylon, the first-century Christians oppressed by the Roman Empire, the 21st-century believers overwhelmed by desperation and despair – for each the message has been and is the same: God is not disinterested.

Chaos and cruelty are here today but they won't be forever.

The Bible gives us a look at what end times will look like. Let me read for you:

READ Revelation 21:3-4

In the end, it's all about relationships. Relationships with God – God wiping away our tears - and relationships with one another.

Gene O'Kelly sensed this, which is why he spent so much of his last days with his friends and family.

Must the end of life be the worst part? Can it be made the best?

These are good questions for each of us, as we face the end of an exceptionally difficult year.

Can this challenging time be the best of times? Can we learn the true value of the present, and find perfection in the mundane? Can we turn ordinary experiences into Perfect Moments – moments in which we see the hand of God at work?

Near the end, Gene O'Kelly arranged times to "unwind" with people who had been important to him over the course of his life. These "unwindings" were intentionally final conversations, held at his house, restaurants, by rivers, or in parks. They were his time to experience friendship and fun. He planned each one in order to make it as perfect as possible.

We can do the same. Whether we have brain cancer or not, whether we are having good days or not, we can do our best to have quality conversations with family members, friends, colleagues and neighbors.

We can work on our relationship with God by regular worship during the season of Advent, and by serving others in the name of Christ.

We can look to the future with confidence and anticipation, trusting that our Lord is involved in our lives in an active and ongoing way, always working for healing and restoration and peace.

If we look towards the future with confidence, we'll be able to marvel at how many Perfect Moments we can have right now.