“Meaning and Purpose”

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Zechariah 14:1-9

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Leo Tolstoy is regarded as one of the great novelists in world literature. He wrote many novels of lasting significance, including War and Peace. He was a success by every human standard. He was married to a beautiful woman, fathered 13 children and lived in luxury on a lavish estate.

In the middle of his life, Tolstoy experienced something of an existential crisis. The things that once brought him meaning—raising a family and becoming a successful novelist—no longer held the same importance for him. He became unfaithful in his marriage. He began to drink and gamble to excess. He sought to find answers in philosophy, Eastern wisdom and the opinions of his fellow novelists; all to no avail. This crisis led him to the brink of suicide.

He found the answer to his existential crisis among the peasant people of Russia. He observed that they found meaning in the Christian faith. Tolstoy became a follower of Christ and, in 1887, wrote an essay which he entitled, A Confession. In it he writes, “The meaning of life is to be found in the fact that God has a purpose for us.”

The prophet Zechariah wrestles with these “meaning of life” questions. Do history and our place within this history have purpose and meaning?

The Biblical prophets have two objectives in their prophetic ministry. They address immediate events in Israel’s life, as well as widen the aperture of their prophetic lens to consider the more distant future.

Take Zechariah: his first eight chapters deal with immediate events, namely Israel’s return from captivity after 70 years of Babylonian exile. Chapters 9-14 expand the vision to explore the end of human history as we know it today. These last six chapters of Zechariah are really hard to understand.

The Protestant reformer Martin Luther wrote two commentaries on Zechariah’s prophecy. His first commentary, in Latin, was written in 1526 AD. Luther provided extensive commentary on the first 13 chapters of Zechariah, yet wrote nothing about chapter 14. He published a second commentary on Zechariah in German a year later. This time he added a
brief section on chapter 14 and introduced it with the candid admission, “Here in this chapter, I give up, for I am not sure what the prophet is talking about.” This does not bode well for me as I try to make sense of this prophecy.

Zechariah opens the 14th chapter by announcing that “The Day of the Lord is coming” (14:1). We have encountered this Day of the Lord prophecy elsewhere in the Minor Prophets. This coming day will both be a time of judgment as well as redemption.

Zechariah declares this Day of the Lord will be a time of reckoning for Israel. “The city of Jerusalem will be captured, the houses ransacked and the women raped” (14:2-3). Some have attempted to apply this prophecy to real time events such as the Maccabean revolt in the second century BC or the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD by the Roman Empire. I’m convinced something far more cosmic is in mind here.

We read, in verse 4, that “On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives.” What is Zechariah talking about here? The Mount of Olives happens to be the place where Jesus retires for prayer after sharing the Last Supper with his disciples. It’s the area where Jesus is arrested and brought to trial. It’s the same location where Jesus ascends into heaven after his resurrection. The angels announce to his disciples who witness his ascension, “Why do you stand here looking into heaven? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). It’s no surprise that the early church interpreted Jesus’ ascent and eventual return to the Mount of Olives as fulfillment of this ancient prophecy.

Zechariah declares in verse 7, that this coming time will be a unique day in human history. There will be no more darkness. A day of endless sunshine seems glorious to any among us who suffer from SAD—Seasonal Affective Disorder. It will also be a day when living water will flow from the city of Jerusalem. For people living in a dry arid climate, such a promise must seem unimaginable.

Our passage reaches a crescendo in verse 9. “The Lord will be king over the whole earth. On that day, there will be one Lord, and his name the only name” (14:9).
Many people in American secular society today are convinced that history has no ultimate purpose. History is cyclical. It just happens; round and round history goes. History has no overarching meaning or purpose.

Our secular society embraces another view of history. Let’s call it the evolutionary approach to history, in which history is moving in an increasingly progressive direction.

Some people who hold this view confidently claim they are “on the right side of history.” This phrase is often used to imply that sooner or later just about everyone will come around to embrace their particular viewpoint. I’m not buying it! History doesn’t take sides. There is no such thing as the right or wrong view of history. History is full of examples of how once popular views turned out to be sadly misguided and mistaken. Popularity is not a reliable indicator of the rightness or wrongness of something.

The Bible puts forward an altogether different worldview. Human history is moving toward a consummation when Christ will return to establish God’s kingdom on earth. There is a grand arc of history that is superseded by God.

I read the advice columns in the newspaper. True confession: yes, I still read the daily paper. An advice columnist this week was asked the question, “There is so much bad news in the world today: Ebola, Gaza, Syria, planes falling from the sky that I feel really overwhelmed and anxious. I care what happens to the world and want to stay informed, but I feel like I’m at the bad news saturation point. Any suggestions on how to stay informed and not get overwhelmed?”

The columnist Carolyn Hax acknowledged that this inquirer is hardly alone in such concerns. She then urged her readers to seize the moment and strive to make a difference in the world. Her advice is solid, as far as it goes, but she essentially sidesteps the meaning of life questions that lie just below the surface.

If I were answering this question, I’d direct this reader to Scripture. All’s right with the world; God is still on His throne. Even when it appears
as though the world is going to hell in a handbasket, the Lord will one day become King over all the earth.

The world is a perfectly safe place. No, really! What is it that we sing? “This is my Father’s world: oh, let me ne’er forget that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the Ruler yet.”

The book of Revelation, the last book in the Bible, makes this same point. Evil does not have the last word; God does! Even when the world seems to be flying apart at the seams, God is still on his throne. One day, Jesus will return and make everything right again.

Zechariah declares that this coming Day of the Lord is a “day known to the Lord” (14:7). He doesn’t say this day will be known to us before it comes. I’m always dubious when Christians attempt to pinpoint Christ’s return. Jesus himself said while he was on earth that this day is known only to God the Father.

There is a so-what application to this sermon—that we can live confidently and expectantly. We can live confidently knowing that whatever happens, we are held by God. We can live expectantly knowing that Christ’s return is certain. St. Augustine wrote, in the 4th century, “The last day is hidden, so every day may be so regarded.” My role isn’t to calculate when Christ will return. My job is to get ready.

I was rocked by actor Robin Williams’ suicide this week. I read his obituaries, including a tribute written by a childhood friend and Christian author Anne Lamotte. Anne uses salty language and can be rather unconventional at times, but her eulogy to Robin Williams rings true, “Live lives worth living. Stop hitting the snooze button. Don’t squander your life on meaningless, multi-tasking b*s*.”

We’ve only got one shot at living this life. Make it count. Live for things that matter. Back to Tolstoy, “Life has meaning because God has a purpose for us.”

One hundred people from this church attended the Willow Creek Global Leadership Summit this week. We were challenged by pastor Bill Hybels to consider a grander vision. Hybels said, “We are created by God on
purpose for a grander vision and when we live into this vision, it gives us meaning and purpose.”

When Bill Hybels spoke about this grander vision, a bolt of inspiration surged through me. What if we devoted ourselves here to pray, dream and wonder aloud about this grander vision? God has big plans for this church; bigger plans than we have yet realized. Where does your great passion address the unmet needs of this world?

I’m urging you to pray about this grander vision for you and our church. Dream and wonder about it with each other. Give as much time to this grand vision as we give to worship changes or the fate of the Redskins this fall or a home remodeling project.

Maybe you’ll become involved with IJM and the plight of human trafficking. Maybe you’ll direct your energies to caring for the oldest or youngest among us. Maybe you will get involved in planting new worshipping communities in Tysons Corner or Reston Town Center. Maybe you’ll extend hospitality to recent immigrants. What’s the big vision God has in store for you and for us?

Earlier, I talked about some worship changes this fall. I don’t want to make too much of these changes. We can become consumed with worship style and preference. I want to ask, what is worship for? Is it not to connect us to God and help us in becoming more like Christ together for the world?

I make a daily practice to read Scripture. Today’s reading from Isaiah 58 is all about fasting and worship. Worship enables us to bow before God and humble ourselves before the Lord. In humility, let’s ask God to show us this grander vision.