

Sermon: "When You Come To The End"
Scripture: Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18
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One December morning a few years back, I picked up The Columbus Dispatch and was reading Mike Harden's column. That day, what Mike Harden had written left me kind of sad and numb. He wrote about four men: Charles Hightower, James Morrow, Charles Ballinger and Charles Deavers. All these men had different backgrounds. Two of them were Afro-Americans, two of them were Anglo. One of them was from the south side of Columbus, one from the eastside and two from the north side. Two of them had lived beyond the age of seventy, and two had died in their fifties; but they all died of natural causes. The one thing they had in common was that their bodies were all at the Franklin County morgue, and no one had claimed them.

Charles Hightower had lived alone in his apartment. The landlady said even though he had lived there six years, she had never seen anyone visit him. She had only talked to him three times in six years, and it was through the door (he always shoved his rent check under the door). Charles Hightower had been dead a week when they found him. In his wallet, there were seven dollars and a picture of a child. They found nothing when they went through the shambles of his apartment that would link him to another person on this earth.

The stories of the other three men are pretty much the same. These men had lived a total of 256 years on the face of this earth, and yet it is almost as if they had never existed. They all died alone without anyone seemingly knowing or caring, and their bodies lay in the county morgue unclaimed. The authorities thought, since it was December and Christmas time, that maybe one of them would receive a Christmas card. So they watched the mail closely during those weeks, and none of the four men received mail of any kind. There was no mail that would link them with anyone else on the face of the earth. The plan was to cremate them sometime early in the year, and their remains would be buried someplace in the corner of some forsaken cemetery without anyone being there who knew or cared.

Mike Harden's article that morning had a powerful impact on me. I thought, "Here are four creatures of God—children of God—and their lives had come to an end, and there was no one there! I mean no one!" I felt so sad about these men. I thought at some time or another their mothers had carried them for nine months in their bodies and had given birth to them. Probably, as little babies, they had been held in the arms of a loving mother. There is a good chance that they had sisters or brothers someplace. Surely they went to school and had teachers and classmates. Surely they worked someplace. Somebody ought to have known them, and yet they died and were to be buried without anyone knowing or caring.

I remember sitting there that morning with The Dispatch in my lap wondering what it would be like to come down to the end of your life with no one who cared enough to be there with you. I wonder what went through their minds in the last conscious moments they had when they slipped away into death. What would it be like to come to the end with no one there? As I think about that, I think there is more than one way to come to the end. This is more than coming to the end of your life; I think there are numerous experiences in life where you and I feel like we are coming to an end when we just think we cannot go on—when we are ready to give up, when we throw up our hands and say, "I don't know what I'm going to do."

My wife, Wilma, and I, a few years back, had really good friends with whom we had done a lot of things. They had been married almost fifty years; and the day before Christmas, Evie had a stroke—and it was a bad one. She was in the hospital, she was comatose, and there was no hope of recovery. I remember the day I went to the hospital and sat with Art beside her bed. He was a broken man. Here he sat beside his wife—a woman that he had loved for almost fifty years and probably more than that, counting his courtship—and her life was coming to an end. He had been married to her all of those years, and now his marriage was coming to an end. I will tell you sitting there beside him that day—do you know what he thought? “My life’s coming to an end, too.” A broken man who had come to an end in his life, and he did not know how he was going to go on.

After I left here as a Pastor of this church, for several years I traveled for the denomination; and my work took me all over the country. I was sitting in an airport in Charlotte, North Carolina one day reading a book—waiting for a connecting flight—when I noticed a fairly young man and a beautiful little girl walk up close to me beside a window. They stood there and talked for a little while; and then an airline attendant came for this little girl, and the man knelt down beside this beautiful little girl and took her in his arms and hugged her and kissed her and held her for as long as he could. The airline attendant said, “It’s time to go.” He stood there and watched as this beautiful little girl disappeared down the long tunnel that would take her into the plane. Finally, a man who was standing there close to him struck up a conversation with him; and I heard the man with the little girl say, “Her mother and I are divorced, and her mother lives out in California and has custody of our daughter; and I only get to see her twice a year.” The man stood there at the window and gazed at the plane—he could no longer see his little girl. I guess he hoped maybe he could see her walk by a window or something, but he could not see her.

He stood there as they pulled the plane out, and the plane taxied out on the runway and took off. He watched the plane go, and then he turned and said, “Oh, well...” and I heard him say to the guy beside him, “It just gets harder all the time.” Then, this man walked away. I did not know him, and I will probably never see him again in my life; but he walked away with a heavy heart. Something was coming to an end in his life, and he was not sure he even wanted to go on.

In one of the churches that we served before we came here, there was a family in our church that was a wonderful family. The husband and wife had worked hard at being good parents, but they had a son that was just in some kind of mischief all the time. For a while, people thought it was funny; and they laughed at him. Then it became more serious, and he kept getting in trouble in school and even was in trouble at church. Wherever he went, he was in trouble; and finally, his trouble became more and more serious. I will never forget the night they called my home and asked if I could come and see them.

That night, I went to their home; and they told me that their son had been arrested for I am not even sure what it was now. He was in trouble so many times I cannot remember; but he had been arrested, and they had him in jail and could not get out until he had a hearing. I sat there with the parents that night, and they said to me, “Where have we failed? We’ve tried so hard, we’ve done everything we know to stand by our son. We’ve gone as far as we know how and they felt like they had come to the end.”

I am telling you today that there are many ways to come to the end of something in your life. There is a great deal of stuff we ought to be coming to an end of in our

lives; but there is sad, hard stuff out there in life that when you come to an end and you wonder how you are going to go on. Of course, in my ministry, I have been with dozens and dozens of really good people who have chosen dissolution or divorce; and it is never an easy experience for them. Couples who have met and fallen in love and planned their wedding and stood before the altar of the church and in the name of God committed their lives to each other. They lived together and loved together and had children together, and then they decide someplace in that in relationship that is just not working. There is all kinds of sad stuff in that and some of you know—it is a feeling of rejection or betrayal or a feeling of failure—and within a dissolution or divorce, there is a part of us that dies and the pain and the grief are real. Even when a dissolution or divorce is the only recourse, it is like coming to the end and you feel alone. It is like feeling that, “I don’t know if I can go on or even want to.”

I want to say to you today that I believe that this thing of coming down to the end is one of the biggest problems that you and I have to face in life. As surely as I am standing before you this morning, all of us get roughed up by life. There is not a one of us who has not been roughed up by life—has not been through some difficult stuff to handle—and there are times when we have sat and looked down at the floor and wondered how we can go on. Many people are coming to the end of one thing or other and feel alone. I am saying to you today that this goes on in every segment of our society. It is a real part of life. All of us are moving toward to the end of something or the other; and when we get there, it will not be easy.

I want to share with you what I think the Scripture says to us. There are two or three things in here that are really important. It says at the very beginning of Psalm 139 that God knows all about us. You can see it right there. He knows when we sit down, when we rise up—He is acquainted with all of our ways. He knows what we are going to say even before we say it. So when we experience something that seems like an end—when it seems that no one knows or cares about us—we can be sure that God does. This is the tough part of this—you may not like this very well—but God knows all about us. How do you feel about the idea that you really cannot hide from God even when you want to? God knows all about us whether we like it or not. God knows about our fears, our frustrations. God knows about our faults and our failures; and no matter whether we are asleep or awake or whether it is night or day, God knows what is going on in our lives. There is not anything that can happen in our lives but what God already knows it.

Then the psalmist asks a very interesting question: where can I go that God is not already there? What he could be saying is, “Where can I go where I can get away from God?” You might as well give up because you cannot do it! He said, “If I go to heaven, God is there and even if I go to Sheol (which is that dark abyss in the Old Testament), God is going to be there.” He said, “Even if I sprout wings and go as far as anybody can go in the whole earth—when I get there, God is going to be there.” Now just think with me about this—there is not anyplace you can go but what God is already there. There is not anything that can happen in your life or mine but what God knows about it and is with us.

In verse eighteen, my translation says, “And when I come to the end, I’m still with You.” Aren’t those great words? Isn’t it great to know that when you and I come down to an end of some kind in our lives that God is not only with us, but we can be with God? Think about if we really believe this, and think about what this could mean in our lives right now. Some of us right here in this room, I am sure, need to hear what I am saying this morning. No matter what kind of problem you and I face in life—it can be a personal problem, it can be a family problem, it can be a mari-

tal problem, and it can be a health problem, a moral problem or even an attitude problem—when you feel like you're coming to the end and you cannot go on, you can know that God is there and you can be with God. The psalmist is saying to us that there is not anything that can take us down as long as we know that God is there and that we are with God. If we know this, we can hold on—we can hang on, we can endure, we can persevere, and we can live and die with hope and assurance. There is no way you can read this passage of Scripture that we have read here today and ever again doubt the faithfulness of God in your life and mine.

When I think of those four men that Mike Harden wrote about, I wish somehow they could have known that, at the end, God was with them and they could be with God. They may have known that, but I would feel much better if I knew that. My wife and I live on a farm over in Perry County; and a couple miles south of our farm, there is a great deal of old, unclaimed strip mine land. I do not know if you have ever seen unclaimed strip mine land or not—it is a sad sight. You stand back and wonder how in the world anybody could ever do anything like that to the earth; but back in the 1940s and the 50s, the coal companies came in and raped the land and moved on and left all these spoiled banks and high walls. For all these years, it has been an ecological disaster area.

Most people who live in the city have no idea what it is like to live in the country—if they did, they would not have moved there! It is pretty hard to move to the country when there is no shoreline running by our place and no water line and you have got to figure out how you are going to deal with that. Some of those folks move to the country not knowing that and this old strip mine land is so cheap that almost anybody can buy it. It does not cost much. There is not anything there—that is why you can get it, but some people have moved to the country on that kind of land and there is now a kind of dysfunctional community that has come into existence. All kinds of bad things keep happening to those folks.

The emergency squad is back there or the fire department or the sheriff's cruiser—there is just something going on back there all the time. About four months ago, a mobile home caught on fire. There was a father, mother and four children; they got out, but they lost everything. It was burned down. The Red Cross came to the rescue, the Salvation Army took care of them for a while and then there wasn't anyplace for them to go. Wilma and I go to a little United Methodist church down there in the little town of 2,000 people, and you can imagine that it is not very big. It takes us about two months to have this many people in our church! We have about 150 people on Sunday, and our church decided that we needed to step in and see if we can help this family.

We took up a collection and figured out that we could rent them a house for three months and could put furniture in it and cloth them and take care of them until we could get something worked out. We did that, and some of us went out and took a backhoe and took some trucks to clean up the old mobile home area—it was a mess. I do not know if you have ever been involved in anything like that, but it just breaks your heart. I was part of the crew that cleaned out the inside of the house—so here we were taking out family pictures, and I was even handed a box that had her wedding dress in. Can you imagine things that are important to your past and your history and so on?

We cleaned all that up and found a mobile home that was a little bit bigger and nicer than the one that burned. We brought that in, set it up and hooked it up better than it ever was before. Some of our women came in and just cleaned that from one end to the other and put furniture in it and finally we moved them in. In the

process of kind of working with this family for those three months, we discovered that we were dealing with a very troubled and dysfunctional family. Paul, the father, was disabled and unemployed and received a small Workers' Comp check. Tonya, the mother, is addicted to alcohol and drugs and moves in and out on the family. You cannot imagine what we have done to try and hold that family together. I wish I could tell you more about that, but Paul and the four children had been going to our church all those months; and I want to tell you that it was an experience. We have some wild kids in our church, but we have never seen anything like Paul's children! I mean it has taken us a while to get used to them.

Wilma and I work in the nursery every two months. We think that when a child like that is standing there to be baptized, that child becomes our child and we're responsible for the children in our church, and so we work in the nursery. The first Sunday I worked in the nursery that Paul's kids were there, I said to Wilma that I am never going back to that nursery again! Anyway, they have settled down, and our hearts have grown. We have a wonderful relationship with Paul, but Tonya is in jail now. She has been in jail in Licking County for two or three months. She missed Christmas, and her lawyer tells us that she is going to get at least two years in a penitentiary; and if the judge is in a bad mood that day, she could get as much as eight years. Our church is trying to support and encourage Paul, and we are trying to take care of the children. We are trying to support Tonya in jail. We are trying to hold this family together and keep these children out of foster homes.

In the past months, I have talked a great deal with Paul, and I know that Paul has been feeling like he has just come to an end. He has lost his home, but he has another one. He is not able to work much, and he has lost the mother of his children. He is afraid that he is going to lose his children—he lives in fear of that—and Paul just knows what it is to come to the end and wonder how in the world he is going to go on. Last Sunday in our church was Communion Sunday, and our church is small enough that our people will just come down to the chancel rail and we commune down here on Sundays. Wilma was helping with the communion elements, and I was sitting by myself; and when I was coming down the center isle to take communion, I felt somebody move up beside me and put their arm around me. It was Paul—and so I put my arm around him and we walked down the center isle arm in arm and came over to the chancel rail and knelt beside each other.

The elements were passed, and Paul and I received Jesus again into our lives—that is what you do when you take communion, you know. You come to receive Jesus all over again in your life—and we did that. I want to tell you something, that was a holy moment for me. Paul knows what it means to come to an end, but I want to tell you he knows that he is among people who love him and care for him. Paul knows what it is to be a part of the church of Jesus Christ and have people care about him. There are a lot of things our church does not do very well, but we know how to love people and wrap our lives around them. Paul knows something else—he goes to Sunday School every Sunday and is learning that God is faithful. And when he feels like he is coming to the end, he knows that God is already there. Don't we know that too? Don't you and I know this morning that there is not anything that can happen in our lives but what God already knows about it? Don't we know that wherever we go and however we mess up our lives and whatever kind of trouble we get into that God is already there and loves us and promises to be with us?

I have come to say to you today that there is something every one of us needs to know—that no matter what is going on in your life right now, God has loved you long before you ever thought of ever loving Him. And when you come to an

end—whatever kind it is—you do not have to wonder how you are going to go on because God said, “I have already come and I am going to walk with you and I will be with you forever.” Don’t you ever forget that.