

Way to the Father

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

John 14:1-6

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

“Time is all you have. And you may find one day that you have less than you think.”

- Randy Pausch

Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh offers a lecture series in which distinguished professors are asked to deliver their hypothetical last talk. But in the case of Dr. Randy Pausch, professor of computer science at Carnegie Mellon, the lecture wasn't merely hypothetical. Randy delivered his last lecture as he was dying of pancreatic cancer at age 47. He dedicated his riveting lecture to his students, wife Jai and three young children. His lecture, presented in the fall of 2007, became an instant YouTube sensation. A book by the same title, which Randy co-authored, became a New York Times best-seller last year. He entitled his talk, *The Last Lecture: Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams*. He asked the 400 people who packed the auditorium that afternoon whether they were spending time on the right things. Are your goals worth pursuing? “Time is all you have. And you may find one day that you have less than you think.”

The Scripture read a few moments ago from John's gospel amounts to Jesus' last lecture. Jesus knows his days are numbered. His detractors are already lying in wait for him and have infiltrated his ranks. That's why John 13-17 is sometimes called Jesus' “Farewell Discourse.” These words constitute Jesus'

parting words to would-be disciples. They represent Jesus' last will and testament; a swan song to any who would take up their cross to follow him.

Jesus announced to his followers at the Last Supper, “I am with you only a little longer....As I said to the Jews, now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come’” (John 13:33).

Simon Peter wants more specifics: “Lord, where are you going?” (13:36).

Jesus answers, “Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow later” (13:36).

Peter isn't satisfied. “Lord, why can't I follow you now? (13:37). I will lay down my life for you.” The irony is unmistakable! A few hours from now, Jesus will be the one laying down his life for Peter.

Word of Jesus' imminent departure must have rocked the disciples' world. Only three years previous, the disciples left everything—friends and family, jobs and homes—to follow Jesus. Now Jesus is talking about leaving; going somewhere they cannot follow.

Jesus reassures his disciples, “Don't let your hearts be troubled. [You] believe in God, believe also in me” (14:1). Jesus says, in effect, trust me on this one. I cannot tell you where I'm going now. It will make sense to you later.

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“In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places,” Jesus continues. “If it weren’t so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.” Every time I hear these words, I expect someone familiar with *West Side Story* to burst out singing, “There’s a place for you.”

“You know the place where I am going,” Jesus tells his disciples (14:4). In fairness to Thomas, if Jesus just said they cannot follow him now but only later, how are they to know the way? (14:5). Jesus answers emphatically, “I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except by me” (14:6).

Notice the emphasis on “way” in verses 4-6. Jesus announces in verse 4, “You know the way.” Thomas asks in verse 5, “But how can we know the way?” Jesus answers in verse 6, “I am the way.”

Jesus represents the way people come to God. He provides access to God (Ephesians 2:18). Jesus says to Philip in verse 9, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” Jesus represents the human face of God. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. Everything we need to know about God comes to us by way of Jesus.

Jesus not only represents the way we come to God, he’s the way God comes to us. In the role of high priest, he presents God to us as well as presents us to God. Jesus becomes the way: God’s way to us and our way to God.

The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus once observed, “The

way up and the way down is the same way.” The way up to God is the same way God comes down to us. It’s the same highway. The way up is the way down.

Deadhorse, Alaska, proudly advertises itself as “at the end of the world.” This town has good reason to lay claim to this dubious distinction. Deadhorse, Alaska, is situated 250 miles north of the Arctic Circle and 1200 miles south of the North Pole. There’s a plausible reason why only a few thousand people live in Deadhorse. Today’s high temperature is expected to reach minus 24 degrees F.

There’s only one road in and out of Deadhorse, Alaska. You must take the Dalton Highway above Fairbanks 480 miles through desolate terrain all the way to Deadhorse. It’s called a highway; actually Dalton Highway is a gravel road with two filling stations along its 18-hour route, so you’d better stop for gas whenever you have the chance. There’s only one road in and out of Deadhorse. The way in is the way out. The way up is the way down. Jesus is the way up and way down. He is the way in and the way out. Jesus is the way we come to God. He’s also the way God comes to us.

Jesus is ideally situated to be our Redeemer. He stands equidistant between God and humanity, sharing solidarity with one as well as the other. I came across this quote by a Russian Orthodox monk, Anthony Bloom, on the treadmill last week: “The only one who could place himself between the two would be someone who was equal to each of

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the two, who would put his hand on the shoulder of the living God without sacrilege, and on the shoulder of the man in his agony, without destroying him.” Jesus is both at one and the same time, fully divine and fully human. Our creeds declare him “true God and true man.”

The Christian church expends most of its energy on the second half of verse 6, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.” This verse brings us face to face with the absolute claims of Jesus. No one comes to God any other way. Christians end up in fisticuffs over whether Jesus is the only way to God. The followers of Christ become downright combative over whether people can come to God any other way.

I take Jesus’ words, “I am the way, the truth and life; no one comes to the Father except through me,” at face value. But I suspect Jesus as the truth gets far more attention than Jesus as the way. We cannot embrace the Jesus truth without the Jesus way. We cannot skip the way of Jesus in a hurry to get to the truth of Jesus. There’s a reason why “the way” comes first. The Jesus way coupled with the Jesus truth leads to the Jesus life. Only when we do the Jesus truth in the Jesus way does it yield the Jesus life.

The Jesus way isn’t synonymous with our way or the American way. Eugene Peterson writes in his book *The Jesus Way*: “More often than not I find my Christian brothers and sisters uncritically

embracing the ways and means practiced by the high profile men and women who lead large corporations, congregations, nations and causes, people who show us how to make money, win wars, manage people, sell products, manipulate emotions and who then write books or give lectures telling us how we can do what they are doing. But these ways and means more often than not violate the ways of Jesus. North American Christians are conspicuous in going along with whatever the culture decides is charismatic, successful, influential—whatever gets things done. The one positive thing that can be said for the ways and means approved and rewarded in this world is that they work, sometimes magnificently, in achieving grandly conceived ends. Wars are fought and won, wealth is accumulated, elections are won and victories posted. But in the process, a lot of people are killed, a lot of people impoverished, a lot of marriages destroyed, a lot of children abused, a lot of congregations defrauded.”

Jesus refuses to do good things the wrong way. Jesus not only cares about the ends, he cares about the means to the end. He is both the end of the road and means to the end of the road. The three temptations the devil throws Jesus’ way teach us that we cannot do the Lord’s work the devil’s way!

The early followers of Jesus were called “people of the way” (Acts 9:2). The primary term Luke employs in Acts to describe Jesus’ followers, “people of the way” or simply “the way,” appears six times

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in the book of Acts (9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22) while the designation “Christian” appears only once (11:26). We must follow the Jesus way to get to the Jesus truth and the Jesus life.

We cannot follow Jesus any way we want. Our following must be congruent with his leading. We are committed to follow the Jesus way to get to the Jesus truth and the Jesus life. Jesus’ way has relevance to everything we do: the way we talk, the way we regard people, the way we use our influence and the way we treat our friends and raise a family.

We’ve been focusing on God’s Big Story in worship this year. This series of sermons, as we’ve said previously, is designed for people who have never read the Bible and don’t know where to start, as well as for those who have read the Bible but don’t understand how these stories fit together into one Big Story.

We’ve locked down on three words in God’s Big Story: creation, fall and redemption. Creation—we are created for relationship with God and each other. Fall—sin causes us to fall out of these relationships. Redemption—God redeems (or rescues) us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We teach God’s Big Story of creation, fall and redemption not merely as an academic exercise. We’re asking you to consider how your life story can become part of God’s Big Story this year. We begin by learning the Jesus way. I invited you several Sundays ago to

read and meditate on Luke’s gospel or the other three New Testament gospels. That’s why we get together in classes and small groups—to reflect on the Jesus way. By investing in the Jesus way we come to know the Jesus truth and live the Jesus life.

Thomas a Kempis wrote nearly 400 years ago:

“Thou art the way, the truth and the life.

Without the way, there is no going.

Without the truth, there is no knowing.

Without the life, there is no living.”

