

July 16, 2006 – Time for Truth
Guest Speaker: Nancy Vamvakas
Circle of Life

Don't you just love birth stories? Do you realize that we've had 8 babies born at The Olive Branch in the last year and we have one more on the way, that we know of! Birth stories fill us with hope and joy and excitement – because we want to believe that new life brings the promise of wonderful future.

On the other hand, death stories leave us sad, uncertain, and sometimes bitter and angry. We often feel like we have been cheated out of something. Whether we have lost a family member, a friend, a job, a marriage, the end of something always leaves us wondering what might have been, could have been, should have been.

While I can't say I enjoy going to funerals, they serve a really important purpose. At every powerful, moving funeral I have ever been to, there are stories about how one particular life made a difference on other people. I love to hear about how one person's choices changed the eternity of other people! I always leave wanting to be a better person.

Today we are going to spend some time talking about birth, death and the stuff in between. King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, put it this way, **“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under Heaven: a time to be born and a time to die...”** (Eccl 3:1-2, NIV)

Let's pray.....

God, thank you so much for giving us this day, and this time to be together. Life and death are such serious subjects, and you have so much wisdom to share with us on how to live well, so I pray that you would guide us today, and use my words, to help each of us here use our lives in the best possible way. I thank you for what you will do in our hearts. In Jesus name, Amen.

I think that our culture is a little obsessed with growing old, or not growing old, as the case may be. We spend huge amounts of time and money trying to deny and defy the inevitable aging process that we all experience. I love the old advertising line – I'm not going to grow old gracefully....I am going to fight it every step of the way! Advertising, Hollywood and magazines all help us to love what is young. We are constantly trying to defy the life cycle.

I know a little something about defying the life cycle law.

I graduated from Queen's University in the late 80's from the Commerce Program. My major was in Marketing, and my dream was to go into Packaged Goods Marketing, which I did – I started my work life at Warner Lambert Adams Branch as the Assistant Product Manager on Certs and Clorets. Bad breath was my life. There are probably lots of you here who either took Marketing 101, or worked in sales, advertising, and know about the Life Cycle of a product. (Draw diagram) A product is launched (born), and with the right advertising and promotional support it would grow and grow until it reached maturity, where sales would start to plateau. It was at that point, that if you did nothing, it would start to decline, because of course any successful product would have the copycat products right behind, stealing your market share with a lower price or a size variety, or something else. And then the product would die. This is the product life cycle model.

What I loved about marketing was the possibility of never having to die! When you got to maturity, you could just relaunch with such significant product enhancements as “now more taste”, gets tougher on bad breath, or, one of my favourites – bold new look! And if you chose the right consumer hot button, you were off again on a new life cycle! I have always felt that Tide detergent has done this better than almost anyone else. How many new and improved Tides have you seen in your lifetime?!

UNDERSTANDING THE LAW

When God talks about life, He is really talking about 2 distinct, but connected things – we have our physical life – where we are born, we live and we die. It's pretty clear. In fact, it looks pretty much the same as my product life cycle from Marketing 101. Then we have a spiritual life – and this is where it gets way more interesting and way more confusing!

I thought we should maybe start with trying to understand the difference in the law of our spiritual lives. OK? If you have your Bibles with you, we are going to start with **John 12: verses 23-26**, where Jesus is giving some final wisdom to his disciples just before he is arrested and crucified:

“I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

What does that mean? Fall to the ground and die.....lose your life....

At first, that language kind of scared me because I thought that it meant I needed to give up everything I cared about and go somewhere to physically risk my life for God. But the more I looked into it, and talked to others with more experience, and researched it, I understood that Jesus was talking about my spiritual life. What Jesus is saying, is that if I spend my life thinking about only my own life, then that is the only life I will ever impact. But if I will give up my single-minded focus on me, and think about OTHER people, then I will also impact many other lives.

How counter-cultural is that?! In a world where we are told to look out for #1, or to worry only about your own needs or that of your own family, God asks us to die that others might live. In fact, He said “The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life will keep it for eternal life!” This is a spiritual truth. Even more, when Jesus was asked who we were to do this for, he told us not to do it for those we love, but for our enemies, too! Jesus gave us a most dramatic example dying for us on the cross. He died that everyone could have eternal life – those who loved Jesus, and those who were responsible for his crucifixion. Without his death, eternal spiritual life was not possible.

If we come back to the Product Life Cycle, it means that when we are here – at our peak, we need to choose to give of ourselves to bring life to other people, just like Jesus did! And God promises that when we do that, we will start not just on another little life cycle for ourselves, but we will give life to others, and gain eternal life. Long before Jesus died physically, he died to himself and his will and his comfort for the sake of others. Throughout his entire ministry, he gave of himself – he shared his time, his love, his compassion, his power to heal and forgive –

all for the good of others – for giving them life! Jesus is the perfect example of a kernel falling to the ground and dying to produce many seeds.

One of the really amazing things about the seed analogy, and the harvest theme that Jesus used many times, is that our actions now can be for the benefit of future life. I am just coming to realize how strongly we are connected across time. How many of you have seen the movie *Back to the Future*? Great movie with Michael J Fox! What happens when he goes back in time and changes the events of the past? The future he comes back to is dramatically different. In fact, by encouraging his father George McFly to stand up to the guy who bullied him all his life, everyone around him benefited! I have heard that a butterfly flapping its wings in California can affect the weather in Tokyo. And a decision George McFly made in 1958 affected the lives of his family and friends back in the future. We use our gifts not just for the people in the world now (although that is very important too), but for the sake of the generations to come after us. What we do with our life affects us, certainly, and our friends and family, but it will affect out far out into the future as well.

When followers of Jesus Christ have loved the way he asked us to, the world was a better place for many generations.

- when followers of Jesus acted on the belief that we are all created equal before God, people like Henry Barnard committed his life to create a public education system, and others offered some of the first public medical care, and changed the course of history for the better. We live blessed by their legacy.
- When followers of Jesus finally awoke to the immorality of slavery, they stepped up to put political, spiritual and economic pressure on societies that were condoning slavery. People like William Wilberforce, dedicated his life to the abolition of slavery. We live blessed by their legacy.
- When followers of Jesus, lead by people like Martin Luther King Jr., said no to segregation and the denial of basic human rights, they showed the world the kind of humanity God planned for us – one where we are all loved by God, and by each other. We live blessed by their legacy.

- When followers of Jesus have loved the poor and forgotten of this world, like Mother Teresa did, it reminds the rest of the world that the poor need to be loved and remembered. And we live blessed by their legacy.
- When followers of Jesus get it right, legacies are left that are a blessing for generations to come.
- Now for certain, there were many times when followers of Jesus got it wrong. When people killed in the name of Jesus during the Crusades, or the witch hunts, or when the church publicly supported slavery, Hitler's holocaust, and discrimination of all sorts. When the church has treated women as second-class citizens, denying them the opportunity to fully live out their mission. When the church has told homosexuals that God hates them, or people of other faiths that God is not interested in them. Some of that, I am ashamed to say, still happens today in churches where people call themselves followers of Jesus. And we live with the consequences of those legacies. There is still hatred of Christians among some Jews for either being the cause, or failing to come forward during Hitler's extermination of 6 million of their family and friends. There have been many generations of African Americans who live with a sense of fear, hatred and a belief that God does not care about them, because of the way their ancestors were bought, sold and abused as slaves. Some people of other faiths or sexual orientation want nothing to do with Jesus because of the way we, his followers, have behaved.
- So while we get to live with the blessings of the good stuff, we also live with the consequences of the awful stuff. Even now, in 2006, we are dealing with the fallout of slavery, discrimination, ethnic cleansing and other critical moral failures.

The question I have for us, is can we choose now to leave a legacy that will bless future generations? Can we, here in the prime of our lives, demonstrate God's outrageous love for people? We are living now in 2006 we there are many opportunities to love this world for the better. This is our watch – what is going to happen on our watch?

What is going to happen on our watch with respect to the HIV/Aids crisis, world poverty, homelessness, illiteracy, global warming, world pollution, war, and other huge global issues? What will the history books say of the followers of Jesus from 2006? I know I want my grandchildren and their grandchildren to be inspired by the bold way we showed love, compassion and commitment to this world. And I am guessing you probably do too. So how do we do that?

SAUL'S STORY

Fortunately for us, we have the most amazing example of someone in the Bible who did a complete 180 on the legacy he left. His name was Saul of Tarsus and his story is an awesome one. It's found in the book of Acts.

Let me give you a picture of Saul when we first meet him in Acts 7, where he is overseeing the stoning death of Stephen, who was the first martyr for Jesus. Stephen's stoning prompted a time of great persecution against the church, and Saul was the most zealous persecutor, going from house to house searching for members of the church and dragging them off to prison.

Saul was a Pharisee, which was a top Jewish religious leader, likely a Shammaite Pharisee, which meant he believed in the most strict interpretation of the laws, as dictated in the Torah. They would have been the fundamentalists of 1st century Palestine. Saul totally believed God was going to send a Messiah, or a Saviour, to rescue Israel from its oppressors. And he thought he might be able to hurry God along in sending the Messiah if he just whipped the house of Israel into order – and he did that with whatever means necessary, including violence and murder. He was extremely “religious”, but the truth is, he was a terrorist of his time.

If his story stopped here, his legacy would have been one of persecuting and torturing and murdering followers of Jesus Christ. Fortunately for Saul, and for the rest of us, God had another plan for Saul. We pick up his story **in Acts chapter 9:3-19 (NIV)**, where he is still up to his terrorist tricks, heading to Damascus to arrest more people.

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see

nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

God met Saul on the road to Damascus in a mighty and dramatic way that day, and it changed everything. Saul did a complete 180. He had a reputation for bringing death. But God had a plan to turn Saul from a guy who brings death into a guy who brings life.

LEAVING A LEGACY

The story of Saul shows us 3 important keys to changing the kind of legacy we leave. Saul's change all started with a personal encounter with Jesus. He met Jesus, and found him to be all

that he was looking for – the way to a restored relationship with the God of Israel – the way to forgiveness.

This encounter put his own life into proper perspective - he knew that he had been given a new life, a new spiritual life, and only because of Christ's death. He wrote in a letter to the church in Rome:

**Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.
Romans 8:1-2 NIV**

There is no condemnation – there is no death – no spiritual death – because he had restored his relationship to God through Jesus Christ.

Because of this new restored relationship to God, he was able to be transformed by God. God was able to work on the inside of Saul's heart and transform him. I have to say – when I first started hearing people talk about God transforming me, I got pretty defensive – I use to think “what's do bad about me that I need a transformation?” If God made me to begin with, so why does he need to remake me now? But if we look at Saul, God did not change who Saul was, he changed who Saul loved. Let me say that again. God did not change who Saul was, he changed who Saul loved. That's what it means to be transformed. Everything about Saul did not change. Saul was a Pharisee – a religious leader – a teacher of the law. Because he was so knowledgeable with the Scriptures, God was able to continue using him as a teacher of the Scriptures. But when he met Jesus, it's like Jesus gave him the last pieces of the puzzle he was missing, and he could take all the knowledge in head and finally apply it to his heart. When Saul was transformed, he was finally able to follow the great commandment:

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Luke 10:27

That's what it means for us. When God transforms us, He doesn't chuck out our talents and passions – He gave them to us! But He changes our hearts toward loving Him and loving

others, and as we do that, we naturally grow away from things that are not grounded in love, and toward things that are.

The transformation of Saul is incredible – he went from loving himself, his religion and his power to loving God with everything he had. He went from trying to imprison and kill followers of Jesus, to being ready to die for them. He did not give up his strength or his intelligence or his gifts, but he gave up his pride, and his instinct to serve only his own interests, and became humble, loving, and generous. He became the kind of person I know I would like to be. It was the kind of total transformation that can only be explained by the power of God.

Sometimes when I read the Bible I think....yeah, but that was then. Sometimes I overlook the fact that God continues to do the same miracles today. You know, if you look for them, there are stories of transformation like Saul all over the place today. Last Sunday we had our Baptism at Willowgrove Farm – who was there? It was AMAZING! We had 35 people take the plunge and go public with their faith in Jesus Christ. Some of them shared their stories, and they were stories of transformation – stories that showed how the Grace and the power of God can come into a heart and fill it with strength and love and compassion. God is at much at work transforming lives today, as he was when he worked on Saul!

The best part, is that once God starts the work of transforming our hearts, He can then give you a legacy-leaving assignment here on earth! Once God had Saul's attention and cooperation, God could share the mission He had for him. The Bible tells us that when he was blind those 3 days, after meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus, he did not eat or sleep, and he was praying. After Ananias went to him, and prayed for his restoration of sight, he was very clear on his mission – he was to go everywhere, sharing the Good news that the kingdom of God had arrived, with the death and resurrection of Jesus.

He understood then, and we have to understand now, that they only worthwhile activity in this life is God's mission – it is the only thing with eternal significance and promise. Joining that mission - the transforming of individual hearts and lives through the power of Jesus Christ – is the best use of our life.

I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

Acts 20:24

I have to share a little historical footnote with you! I learned something kind of neat this week about Saul. The Bible tells us that Saul was also called Paul, and the Bible switches to Paul shortly after his conversion. I had always assumed that this was a sign of his total transformation, that he was given a new name, but I read another explanation, and it kind of cool with respect to talking about what we are taking about today. Saul was committed to his mission to go to the Gentiles, which for him, meant going to the Romans and Greeks. The language he dealt with mostly was Greek. Paul is just the Greek version of Saul. It would be like Richard moving to South America, and in order to fit in, pronouncing his name as Ricardo! Saul wanted to assimilate with those he was trying to share the gospel with, so he called himself Paul. So, generally, when we are referring to the Pharisee, we say Saul, but when we are referring to the apostle, we say Paul....clear like mud? Everyone OK?

So the Apostle Paul called himself and us to be that kernel that falls to the ground and dies, so that a large harvest of others might find life. He summed it up like this:

Philippians 1:21-26 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

He basically said to the church in Philippi – you know, I would really prefer to retire from this life and go hang out in heaven with Jesus and be free from all this work, but I know that by doing what I am doing, I am making it possible for you to build your community, and share the gospel, so I am going to stick around as long as I can to help you – I will face whatever I have to for you.

Once he knew what his mission was, Paul stuck to it.

So what was Paul's legacy? Paul brought the good news of Jesus Christ to likely tens of thousands of people in that first generation, which in an age without mass communication is pretty impressive! He wrote a good chunk of the New Testament. Every generation since that time has had these books of the Bible, which give us clear guidance for being transformed by Jesus. He invested in many key leaders in the emerging churches, giving them the tools they

needed to carry on Christ's work after he was gone. We live blessed by his legacy. We can imagine God saying to Paul, at the end of his life. "Well done, Paul! You were faithful and committed ...now come and celebrate with me!"

We have been blessed by the generations before us, and God is hoping we will leave a legacy of blessings after us. To do that, we need to have a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, allow God to transform us into the people he created us to be, and then we need to let Him guide our lives.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

I don't know where you are today. (come back to diagram) There may be some of you here today who are hearing this for the first time. You might just be starting to check out spiritual things and you have not yet decided whether you want to put your faith in Jesus, or be empowered to change, or if you can even trust God to do it. And that is totally OK. The Olive Branch was created for you – we want this to be a safe place for everyone to come, hear what the Bible says, ask questions, and figure things out. I would encourage you to keep coming, keep asking and keep thinking. Do you remember when we read the story of Saul at the beginning. When Jesus called to him on the road to Damascus, Saul replied, "Who are you Lord?" It is OK to say – Who are you God? And if you ask him, he will answer you.

There may be others who are here – at the plateau. You have put your faith in Jesus Christ and want to be that kernel that falls to the ground and dies, in order to bring a whole crop of new life. But sometime we get stuck knowing how we can do that? How can we continue to be transformed?

I can tell you personally, that transformation is not an instant thing! It is a lifelong process. I take comfort that even Paul, who had a dramatic, and seemingly instant conversion experience, spent his life battling his own tendency to love the wrong stuff. He said it something like this: Why do I do the things I don't want to do, when the things I want to do, I don't do! In other words, why do I keep doing stuff that is wrong? God is not expecting instant perfection, but he is expecting perseverance and an honest desire to be transformed. And if we honestly want to

be transformed, they are some ways we can cooperate with the work he wants to do in our hearts.

One of the most important suggestions is to connect with other people who have the same goal. Becoming who God created you to be was never meant to be a solo journey – God always intended us to work this out in groups. We all need coaches, or mentors, or peers, who will work through this with us, and sometimes point out stuff about ourselves we are just not able to see. Sometimes our friends will point out where they see God has gifted us – I am very thankful to the small group I meet with regularly for the encouragement they give me to use my gifts. Sometimes our friends will point out where they see we might be off track. I have a wonderful friend for this – Debbie Deacon – who meets with me regularly to help keep me on the straight and narrow, and to challenge me when I may be letting my own pride get in the way of doing the right thing. I am also really thankful to my husband Elias, who also helps me with some good reality checks – he knows my weaknesses and my temptations and helps me see when they affect my choices. I know that I could never grow on my own – I need people pulling me forward when I get complacent, cheering me on when I get discouraged, and keeping me on track when I lose sight of the goal. I would encourage you to find a support network, too. Our small groups ministry, called Roots, will be starting up again in September, and if you are not part of a group, I think you would find it a real boost to becoming the person you want to be.

On the flip side of that, we all need to be a support to others. We all need to be an encourager to someone who needs it. It's good to stop and ask, who can I share whatever wisdom and talents I have with? Who can I faithfully pray for, and actively encourage? Sometimes we think we have to be one of the most expert experts in something if we are going to coach someone, but it's not true! I don't have to be a renowned parenting expert to share some things I have learned about raising children. I just have to be willing to share my experiences – my mistakes, successes and even my lucky breaks!

Another important part of becoming transformed, it to make sure you are clear what you are being transformed into. Remember that transformation means changing who you love? God wants us to reflect HIS heart and HIS love, and so he sent us Jesus to give us a clear picture of

what that looks like. By studying about Jesus, and what he said and did and taught, gives us a clear goal to aim for. We need to KNOW Jesus if we are going to become LIKE him.

I just remembered this old Nike Ad – where a bunch of people were at a driving range, hitting golf balls. And they were all just terrible! They were hacking and missing and shanking the balls. Then Tiger Woods arrives and starts to hit awesome shots, straight down, 350 yards (to wonderful orchestral music). One by one, the other golfers copy him, and they start to hit straight and 350 yards, until they are all hitting beautifully. Finally, Tiger finishes, picks up his clubs and leaves, and they all go back to being hackers!

If you want to live like Jesus, you have to keep him right in front of you! Saul asked – Who are you Lord? If we are trying to answer this question, reading the Bible will help us find the answer. Does anyone need a Bible? We have copies that you are welcome to take home. Probably the best place to start would be with the Books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – they are found about 2/3 of the way through the Bible. Again, getting to know Jesus is no quick step – it is a lifetime of studying God's Word, and spending time thinking about it. There is no microwave version of transformation!

Not only does it take time, but it takes space. God asks us to make time in our lives to listen to Him. Paul spent 3 days praying and fasting to hear from Him. Paul also spent quiet time in order to stay tuned to the guidance of the Holy Spirit so he knew where to go and who to talk to. Jesus regularly broke away from the crowds and the activity to spend time alone hearing from God. We will never get the kind of direction from God we need by always living life loud and fast.

So now that we know that when we meet Jesus, and through him allow God to transform us to become the people he created us to be, He will empower us to leave a legacy. When we love Him, He will help us to love others, and to share our lives and our gifts with them. When we accept the mission He gives us, He will help us to “guard our watch”, which will bless other people now and far into the future. We get to be a kernel that falls to the ground and dies, bringing life to many many seeds. And God is faithful to his promise of giving us eternal life.

At the beginning we talked about how we feel when someone dies. Knowing that physical death is inevitable, we get to choose how we use our life. Ironically, it is often the people who are given 6 months to live who find they experience the most life, because they start to live with a sense of urgency, they make the most out of each moment. Let's not wait - let's start living right now with the knowledge that we only have this time to make a difference. Let's be the kind of people God is looking for – the kind of people who spend our own lives bringing life to others; the kind of people who leave a legacy.

Let's pray....

Heavenly Father, we thank you this morning for giving us a chance to be here together worshipping you. And we thank you that you didn't just plunk us on this earth and expect us to use our lives muddling through and relying on our own strength or wisdom, but you come alongside us. You meet us when we ask for you, and you empower us to make a difference. I ask that you would be with each of us this week, as we try to love you and love others the way you want us to. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.