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An Imagination Seized By Hope Opening Convocation Address

September 30, 1999
Seattle Pacific University

Philip W. Eaton, President

As we begin this new year, we stand on the threshold of a new millennium. Before the academic year is out we will usher in the year 2000. I am sure you have all kinds of parties planned around this pivotal turn of the year. It is quite a moment.

Along with all the parties, I hope this historical turning point will prompt some significant reflection in our community. This is a very good moment to take stock about where the world is going.

As we ponder our future, let me say first that I think the stakes are very high. I believe we stand at a crossroads, what Thomas Cahill calls a hinge of history, a time when the door of history might swing wide open to a new flourishing of human experience, and then again it just might completely swing shut on the kind of civilization we have known. Which way do you think the door will swing?

In his marvelous little book *Crossing The Threshold of Hope*, Pope John Paul II quotes Andre Malraux that the 21st Century will be a century of religion or it will not be at all. I think Malraux expresses a tension here that we all feel: as we look toward the future we are at times hugely hopeful and at others terrifyingly pessimistic.

I might say it this way: either the future will be guided by an imagination of Christian hope or the world may just crumble into chaos and disaster. As you let your imagination loose on the next century, which way do you think the world is moving? I would love to know what you students think about the future. I would love to know what you think your role is in shaping that future. Are you hopeful?

Pope John Paul confidently proclaims a "springtime for Christianity in the 21st Century." Do you believe that? Do you believe that Christian hope is breaking out and blossoming all over the world?

Making Choices. I am reminded of Robert Frost's little poem, "The Road Not Taken." This is a marvelous, subtle little poem about standing at the crossroads, looking down one path and then down the other, imagining what life will be like if you choose one and not the other, knowing of course that you have to choose, and knowing as well that what you choose will make all the difference.

Listen to Frost:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,

Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.
I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

I use this poem to ask you to reflect on your own personal choices as you face a new century. Consider your choices carefully, Frost is saying—they will indeed make all the difference.

But then I imagine that we are at such a point in history as well. Two roads diverge for us as a culture, a civilization. And it is up to us to make the choices and how we choose will make all the difference.

And where will we be as Christians as the culture makes these pivotal choices? Sitting on the sidelines? Squabbling among ourselves about our own differences while the culture goes about its way, choosing its future without our input? Or will we be deeply engaged, confident that we can make all the difference in the world, confident indeed that we can shape the future of the world?

We Must Choose Between Two Paths. As I scan our cultural, historical moment, I imagine two paths occupied by two huge, seminal figures. I have been reading both of these figures this summer, and they represent for me fresh and clear images of the choice we have to make.

Down one path sits Frederick Nietzsche, one of the looming, formative thinkers of the twentieth century. The Apostle Paul, one of the great thinkers of all time, occupies the other path. Think with me on this choice.

I have been reading Nietzsche this summer because I felt compelled to get in touch again with this seminal voice of the 20th Century. His voice continues to shape and inform much of higher education in Europe and America.

Consider Nietzsche. As you read Nietzsche you come to hear a voice that is full of irony, an undercutting voice, the voice of cynicism that is curse of our age. It is a tone of suspicion about all that has gone before: a suspicion about tradition and wisdom, a fierce suspicion about the Christian faith, a suspicion about how we know and why we believe.

As Walter Kaufmann says, Nietzsche consistently calls for "an emancipation from religion": "God is dead," says Nietzsche, famously. "God remains dead. And we have killed him." This is Nietzsche's first call to courage—the courage to admit

the unvarnished truth that God is dead and that religion holds out for us only damaging illusions about the way things are.

And then Nietzsche asks, "What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither are we moving now? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left?" When God is dead to our culture, and in our lives, how do we know what is up and what is down, what is right and what is wrong? "Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space?"

And then, if we think Nietzsche is the path we ought to choose at this crossroads of history, consider the consequences of seeing the world his way: "You will never pray again, never adore again, never again rest in endless trust; you deny yourself any stopping before ultimate wisdom, ultimate goodness, ultimate power, while unharnessing your thoughts; you have no perpetual guardian and friend . . . there is no reason any more in what happens, no love in what will happen to you; no resting place is any longer open to your heart, where it has only to find and no longer to seek; you resist any ultimate peace."

Does this sound horrifyingly unreal? I suggest that it comes close to describing where our culture really lives. Is your imagination shaped and colored by Nietzsche? Well, this is one path for our future, a path we are already walking.

Let me describe another possibility, that second path that we peer down. On this path we see a world imagined by the Apostle Paul. As some of you have heard me say, I have been deeply moved this summer re-reading I Corinthians.

Paul found himself at a hinge of history too. His life had been transformed, turned absolutely upside down, by an encounter with Jesus Christ. His worldview had been shattered and dramatically reshaped. He imagined new creatures guiding the way for a new world.

In Ellen Charry's words, Paul believed that God wanted the world to flourish. He felt it was an extraordinary privilege to participate in God's flourishing. He announced to the Corinthians that they could indeed be a part of the sweeping plan of God's grace for all the world. Wow, think about the future if God's grace gets a grip on the imagination of the world.

Paul wants the Corinthians to believe, to imagine, that they are, in Richard Hays words, "caught up in a cosmic drama, and they must play a distinctive role in God's action to rescue the world."

But in order to participate in this plan of grace, Paul hammers on the Corinthians to change their ways. There are certain requirements. This vision "entails certain obligations of obedience," says Hays. It means we must love one another. Think of that. Love must be the dominating, guiding value of our lives. It means we have to learn to get along. We must be grace-filled if we are going to make a difference in the world. "We can learn to see ourselves within the story of God's grace," Hays says "in such a way that despair and pride and petty conflict should fall away."

I know I am simplifying, but in some ways we are faced with a choice between Nietzsche and Paul. And what a choice it is.

I can just hear you saying: So you are on the side of Paul, huh? You are on the side of hope, right? Look around. Don't you read the papers?

Can't you see we live in a world where one ethnic group tries to cleanse another off the face of the map? Can't you see there is extraordinary hatred loose across our land? Can't you see that we live in a world where some people make more money than they can possibly count while others starve in the streets without food or shelter? How can you say you are hopeful? Nietzsche has won. We have been left to create our own meaning and we have blown it.

And then think about this: Can you imagine a world without Shakespeare, without Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, without Beethoven or Bach, without van Gogh or Monet, without Emily Dickinson or Zora Neal Hurston? Can you imagine a world where people own Bibles but no longer read them? Can you imagine a world where Jesus is declared a fiction and Christians are everywhere marginalized and afraid to speak?

Imagine? This sounds like the world we live in. Nietzsche has won. The past has been totally discredited. The barbarians have already invaded and we are all dumbed down spiritually, intellectually, and morally. How in the world can you be hopeful?

Be A Remembering People. I am emphatically on the side of hope. I am hopeful about the future. I think Christians must engage this culture with exuberant confidence that we can reshape the culture.

So let me tell you why I am so hopeful as I look into the future. I am working hard to shape an imagination of hope. I call on you students to be a generation of hope. But let me tell you this: an imagination of hope is grounded on memory. You can't imagine the future unless you remember the past. Christians are a remembering people. And you can find hope in the Christian story.

And so the reason I am so hopeful is that I remember Paul and the little band of Corinthians who imagined that God's kingdom could flourish all across the world. They believed, imagined, that they could participate in this story of grace.

Well, I am caught up in that hopeful story. If it hadn't been for Paul and that little group of Christians in Corinth the world would have been a very different place. It took courage and it took imagination and they changed the world.

And then I remember a little band of Irish monks, led by St. Patrick, facing the collapse of the Roman empire, facing the collapse of order, facing as well the onslaught of the barbarians, holding out for learning, holding out for art, holding out for all of this shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ. (Some of you will be studying this story of hope with Professor Erickson this quarter.) Listen to this Irish story—a little band of scruffy monks, seemingly isolated on the fringes of civilization, gripped by an imagination of hope, and truly saving civilization for the gospel.

But let's bring it closer to home. I have hope for the future because I am experiencing something extraordinary going on here at Seattle Pacific. I don't know what it is exactly, but the Spirit has taken hold of this place.

Now that's a bold thing to say, a scary thing. I want to guard against presumptuousness here, but I don't want to cave in to Nietzsche's undercutting irony either. Something is going on. I have watched this community change. I believe we are now a community that approaches being grace-filled. Oh, I know there will be some crisis in the spring that will bring me out of the clouds, but I believe we are modeling here, in our small but significant way, a path toward hope.

I am indeed emphatically on the side of hope. I want to carry an imagination of hope into the new millennium. And I want to call you students to be a generation of hope. The world is waiting to see what kind of an imagination you have.

Let me close with these words from Paul that are my guiding text for the year:

"I pray that your inward eyes may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope to which he calls you, how rich and glorious is the share he offers you among his people in their inheritance, and how vast are the resources of his power open to us who have faith." (Ephesians 1:18-19)

Standing on this threshold, facing a choice about our lives and the future of the world, these words are stunningly appropriate.

My advice this morning as we begin this new millennium. Choose God. Choose Jesus Christ the light of the world. Choose Paul. Chose the Irish monks. Make the fundamental choice, the ground point choice.

And then move out into the culture, engage the culture with all the skill you can muster. And go confidently, go exuberantly, knowing that you can indeed make all the difference.

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