

I have mentioned before the concept of making “last year resolutions” instead of “new year resolutions.” The idea is to contemplate your death. What if this coming year were to be your last on this earth? What would you resolve to do?

I asked myself that question in earnest twenty years ago as I lay in bed on December 24, 2005, two days after having cancer surgery. Melanoma—just skin cancer, not brain cancer, not involving internal organs or bone marrow, but melanoma is an aggressive and potentially deadly cancer. I should have had that spot on my back examined months earlier. The dermatologist looked at it and ordered an immediate biopsy. The biopsy was positive and they wanted me in surgery the next week. They would cut out a 1-inch margin around the tumor and run further tests to make a stage diagnosis and see what further treatment might be needed. Due to the Christmas holiday and then a weekend, I would wait eight days for results. I had time to think. In 2005, the survival rates for melanoma were lower than today. What if I had only a year to live? I thought about what I would want to leave behind for my daughters; I thought about dear friends I would want to see; I thought about how I was spending my life day to day—my current patterns of living. I thought about what is truly important in life.

I finally got the news the following week that there was no evidence the cancer had spread, so it was unlikely to kill me any time soon. But, I thought, now that I’m going to live, why not go ahead and do the things I had realized I would want to do if I was going to die—the things I realized were truly important? After all, we *are* all going to die, we just don’t know when. It is because of that cancer experience and the decision to do in the next year of my life what I would have done if it were my last year, that I am now married to the woman I’m married to, and am a pastor here in Western NY instead of a professor in Atlanta.

The stark thought of dying prompted me to make major life decisions I’m glad to have made, to live in ways that were more life-giving. I do not think God gave me cancer so that I would make those decisions. I don’t think God micromanages the world in that way or goes around handing out deadly diseases. But I do think the decisions I made while contemplating death moved me in directions more aligned with God’s will and with what is truly important in life. The cancer re-emerged twice more with increasing severity half a dozen years later, in 2011 and 2012, giving me fresh opportunities to contemplate death and re-evaluate how I was using my life. I am glad to still be living thirteen years later and now I try to remember to contemplate death regularly, without the prompt of cancer. There are stories of some monks making their own coffins and then keeping them in their cell or bedroom, not to be morbid, but in order to sustain their resolve to keep their minds focused on what is ultimately important in life.(Rest assured, I do not have a m-sized coffin in the parsonage at this time)!

As we move into this new year, I invite you to consider making some “last year resolutions.” May it be a very good year for all of us, and not our last.

Blessings and peace,

