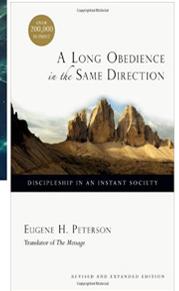


Wednesday, October 31, 2018  
6:30pm  
St. Mary's Episcopal Church



**Eugene Peterson,  
author of *The Message* and pastor to pastors,  
dies at age 85**

**Let's get started....**

### **About this News Story**

Eugene Peterson, most prominent as author of *The Message* (one commentator said "the Bible for the heart") died October 22 at age 85. "It feels fitting that his death came on a Monday, the day of the week he always honored as a sabbath during his years as a pastor," his family wrote in a statement. "Eugene has now entered into the fullness of the kingdom of God and has been embraced by eternal sabbath."

Please read on the opposite side, a very brief synopsis of Eugene Peterson's life.

**A** *long obedience in the same direction.* Peterson didn't invent that phrase but borrowed it from the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who despite his pronouncement that God was dead, once wrote, "The essential thing in heaven and earth is that there should be a long obedience in the same direction; there results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living." In using the phrase, Nietzsche seems to have meant that the meaning in life is found by adopting a standard and sticking to it. Peterson, however, was wise enough to see the value of the phrase and apply it to Christian discipleship.

**Let's ask some questions...**

1. Given the joys that novelty and fresh experiences can bring to life, do you consider anything marked by "a long obedience in the same direction" as a grim way to approach life? Why or why not? If not grim, what term would you use?
2. "Obedience" itself is not a popular notion in our society. Why do you think that is?
3. In what realms of life, if any, have you committed yourself to a long obedience in the same direction?
4. In what ways does discipleship -- "a long obedience in the same direction" -- enhance your life? In what ways does it cost you your life?
5. Today is Halloween...All Hallows Eve. In what way, or ways, does our topic have to do with celebrating "hallows"?

About two weeks ago brought an announcement that the preacher, professor and author Eugene Peterson, 85, was receiving hospice care, indicating that he is likely in the last months of his life. He died last Monday.

Outside of Christian circles, Peterson is not well known. But many who do not know his name still know his powerful rendering of the Bible into contemporary language, titled *The Message*, which is a bestseller, or some of his other books, the most recent of which was released earlier this year. Still others may recall the YouTube documentary about praying the Psalms that Peterson did in 2016 with U2 front man, Bono.

Peterson was a founding pastor in 1962 of Christ Our King Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) in Bel Air, Maryland, where he served for 29 years before retiring in 1991. He then worked as Professor of Spiritual Theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, until retiring in 2006. He continued to write books after that.

Peterson was hospitalized October 9 "when he took a sudden and dramatic turn in his health caused by an infection," according to an email from his son Eric. And that was on top of dementia and congestive heart failure, both of which are progressing, according to his son.

Robert Creech, a professor of Christian ministries at Baylor University's Truett Seminary, stated, "Eugene Peterson has encouraged, formed, and often literally saved the ministry of more than one pastor over the years through his writing and thinking (I would include myself in that list). He has refreshed scripture for many through his thoughtful paraphrase of the Bible."

When Peterson entered into hospice care, *Christianity Today* had an article which was subtitled "Beloved pastor and author nears completion of his long obedience in the same direction," alluding to a phrase Peterson used for his book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*.

Though Peterson's book with that title was published in 1980, "a long obedience in the same direction" remains a good description of Christian fidelity and of perseverance in the way of Christ.

## Connecting Peterson-style discipleship to some Scripture...

Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:62)

Or as Eugene Peterson translates it:

Jesus said, "No procrastination. No backward looks. You can't put God's kingdom off till tomorrow. Seize the day."

From the context verses, it's clear that Jesus was addressing these words not to people who have been his followers for a long time, but rather to some who were at that point offering to become his followers. Thus, his words are an attempt to give a picture from the very beginning of what discipleship demands -- in short, "You'll be expected not to turn back."



### Questions:

- Is Jesus being reasonable and fair here?
- Why didn't he offer discipleship as a no-risk, free trial such that, if one tried it but didn't like it, one could cancel one's membership in the "Christ club" with no further obligation?

Here are a few quotes from Peterson's book *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*. Choose any that resonate with you and tell us what it means to you.

- And yet I decide, every day, to set aside what I can do best and attempt what I do very clumsily -- open myself to the frustrations and failures of loving, daring to believe that failing in love is better than succeeding in pride.
- I will not try to run my own life or the lives of others; that is God's business.
- We care more for our possessions with which we hope to make our way in the world than for our thoughts and dreams which tell us who we are in the world.
- Too often we think of religion as a far-off, mysteriously run bureaucracy to which we apply for assistance when we feel the need. We go to a local branch office and direct the clerk (sometimes called a pastor) to fill out our order for God. Then we go home and wait for God to be delivered to us according to the specifications that we have set down. But that is not the way it works. And if we thought about it for two consecutive minutes, we would not want it to work that way.

*I've loved being a pastor, almost every minute of it. It's a difficult life because it's a demanding life. But the rewards are enormous--the rewards of being on the front line of seeing the gospel worked out in people's lives. I remain convinced that if you are called to it, being a pastor is the best life there is. But any life can be the best life if you're called to it.* (Eugene Peterson)

### Questions:

- What do you think makes a pastor's life "demanding"?
- How do you know if you are "called" to your life?

Eugene Peterson has had a profound impact on many Christians and Christian leaders and, now that he has died, he will be missed. Whose leadership would you miss profoundly if they should die? Whose leadership have you missed because they have died?