

SERMON
“Living the Promise”
Becky A. Hebert
August 8, 2010
St. John Chapel UCC

Luke 12: 31-40

“Instead strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

“Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit, be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

“But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Here ends the readings from holy scriptures. Thanks be to God!

SERMON

At our last Semi-annual Congregational meeting, I mentioned that the first sermon I preached from this pulpit on April 17th of 2005 was titled, “Quest for Presence”: A sermon I hoped would lay the ground work for how strongly I feel about spiritual development—which is a quest, or a seeking for, God’s presence. Another way of saying this comes from today’s gospel reading: “Strive for, quest for--seek God’s kingdom.” As I have explained so many times over, God’s kingdom is not just about where we go when we die. It is oh so much more than that. God’s kingdom is anyplace God dwells. So when we seek God’s kingdom, we are seeking to dwell where God dwells. We are questing for God’s presence. We are looking for where God is active, in our world and in our hearts. We are asking, “Are you there God?”

Many have voiced the question. From Brother Lawrence to Barrington Bunny, our literature speaks of the quest for God’s presence. Frederic Myers asks of God, “Are You friendly?” Malcolm Boyd wants to know, “Are you running with me, Jesus?” For Christians, this quest is critical, for according to the Bible, all else will be given to us if we so strive.

In this segment of Luke’s, there appears a grouping on the perils of wealth. Last Sunday, we heard the parable of the “rich fool.” Right before our text of today, Luke’s version of the good news focuses on our anxiety about money and other material matters. You know, it is the section where Jesus mentions the birds and the flowers, and how well God cares for them. Hence, how much more God will care for us.

Then comes a brief transitional passage that opens our story of today. It speaks on getting rid of our anxieties over money and all things material.

Do not be afraid, little flock (that's us), don't be troubled about whether the well will dry up, or whether you've got enough money in the bank. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and **all else will be given unto you.**"

Throw out your anxiety and negative doomsday talk. Focus instead on finding out where God hangs out.

And ready yourself to receive. Dress for action... Put on you white sports coat and pink carnation for tonight you shall twirl the woman of your dreams around the dance floor. Expect at every turn to walk into the borderland of the holy, the promise land, the place where God dwells, God's kingdom on earth—for today we shall be with **God in Paradise.**

According to the Hebrew text of the Bible, as told by The Rev. Dr. Joey Jeter, the people of Israel were camped at the foot of Mount Sinai. They had already received from the hand of God their freedom and the law with which to organize their lives together. And it was time. It was time to go. It was time to strike the tent and move out toward the promise land, but for one thing that they lacked. And Moses...Moses, who was the only person in our history who could quarrel with God and win...was dickering with God about this very thing.

God commands, "It is time for you to go Moses, to go up to **the land which I promised** to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

Moses asks, "Are You going with us?"

God replies, "No! But I'll send an angel with you."

Moses counters, "That's not good enough!"

God replies, "But if I go with you I might consume you. You are such a stiff necked people. You disgust me so. I don't think I could stand it to be with you."

Moses reasons, "If you won't go with us, then don't send us up from here."

Moses knew that the presence of God with the people was in danger. He knew that without the presence of God, they never would have made it out of Egypt, through the water, and across the desert. He knew that without the presence of God, they were doomed as a people. And so he ran the most outrageous bluff in history. “If You won’t go with us, then we won’t go.”

It was all at stake in that moment. Was the faith that led to our faith simply a code layed down by an absent God who can’t stand us? Or, was it to be a faith marked by the presence of God? Is God with us? Or is God gone?

Finally the dialogue continues.

God answers, “OK, I will go with you and I will give you rest.”

Moses, “Sheww!”

In 1908 the Foreign Missionary Society sent out a call for a medical missionary. They needed a medical missionary to go to the new mission station that had opened in Tibet; that mountainous and mysterious country known as the roof top of the world.

There was a young doctor in Tennessee devoted to Christ and determined to be a missionary, who had prayed to be sent to the most difficult place in the world. When Zenus Sanford Loftus heard the call to Tibet, he knew that his prayers had been answered. He applied, was accepted, and on the 18th of September of that year he left Tennessee for East Asia. A journey of many months brought him to Nag King, China, and he still had thousands of river boat and pack train miles to go. On the morning that he left Nag King he wrote in his journal, **“O God, if you will not go with me then do not carry us up from here.”** Then he shouldered his pack and began walking toward the mountain, confident in the reply.

“How confident are we? Where is God?” —we’ve got to ask, if the kingdom of God is where all the characteristics of God’s reign are present and therefore, the place where God dwells. Is God hanging out with us or not? Are we seeking, first and foremost, the kingdom of God? If the proof is in the pudding, then why is **all else not being given unto us?**

Where are we to begin in our quest for that enduring sense of presence, that illusive sense of “something” deeper and more real than anything we can actually touch? Can you not remember places and times when you were reminded that God may be hidden but is never absent? Or registered a fleeting moment when something brushed past you that made your hair stand on end? Was it at a bed side, in a sanctuary, or at a retreat, a grave, a family meal, a mountain top, a valley, or holding hands with friends in prayer, or when you had prayed for something for so long...for years, and when you least expected it—was that the time when all the characteristics of God surrounded you? **Stillness. Power. Fire. Peace, love, mercy, forgiveness, hope, and the truth came**--the truth that God is still with us. When did you come to know that the presence of God is real and powerful, and benevolent and illusive? Or, are you still resting on the laurels of a hand-me-down faith--a faith your mother, father or someone...handed down to you. Being a Christian is about working to develop your own relationship with God.

“Oh God, if you will not go with us then do not carry us up from here.” With these words upon his lips, Zenus Loftus left Nag King that February morning in 1909 confident in his heart and soul that God walked with him. Zenus Loftus moved forward with God through many difficult miles. When he reached the mission station in Tibet, he stored his gear and set to work.

He looked out his window the next morning and saw that the sick and suffering were being carried to him. With his medical eye, he detected the signs of typhus and small pox, but he

threw open the door and said, “Come in!”, and ministered to them in the name of Christ. He also caught both diseases. A few days later, after a year’s journey, they buried him in a lonely grave by a mountain road.¹

When I first heard of him I thought, if God was with him, how could God let such a thing happen? Here’s a man, if ever there was one, who is seeking first the kingdom of God. Why was **all else not being given unto him?** And then I remembered. My God, I remembered what we who wear the name of Christ should know above all others. If you say that what he did was to no avail, if you say that his short ministry was a failure, if you say that what he did was to no avail, if you say that his short ministry was a failure, if you say that what he did meant nothing or did not testify to being surrounded by **stillness, power, fire, peace, love, mercy, forgiveness, hope, and truth;** all the characteristic of God’s presence, then I dare you to stand beneath the cross of Jesus and tell me that again.

Oh God, if you will not go with us then do not carry us up from here. There’d be no point, there’d be no reason. Why go past the confines of these walls to do ministry if we do not have You to offer. Or bring others in if You are not here. But if You will open this congregation up to receive Your presence, and go with us into our future then, then we can be Your people and speak a good word for Jesus. If you will but go with us, then we can bask in the glow of truly knowing what it means to be present for each other. If you will go with us, then send us to the difficult places where we are needed. Send us through the skies and across the roads and down the rivers and over the highways and across the seas to carry this message, this news that You remembered, and You sent Jesus, and we are not alone. If you will go with us, then send us to every hamlet and village and town and city and country that we can reach, with this message of

¹ Zenus Sanford Loftus story from Joey Jeter’s General Conference Sermon

redemption and hope, confident that You will give us the words and the lives that we can
“unbind the gospel” for others. If You will go with us, then send us forth bound together as a
people with a band of steel, hopeful in everything, afraid of nothing, ready to live and willing to
die.