

SERMON

Starters

Robert V. Dodd

June 3, 2007

First Sunday after Pentecost (Trinity Sunday)

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Psalm 8,
Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

The Guided Life

Following his baptism, we are told that Jesus was “led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.” (Luke 4:1-2). Whenever the Spirit leads us through the broken places, it is then that we need to know the power of God’s presence. The guided life can lead us through times of trial and tribulation, pain and suffering, defeat and despair, as well as times of victory and triumph, healing and wholeness, success and prosperity.

Jesus promised his followers that the Spirit would guide them into all truth. It is the Holy Spirit who makes Jesus’ presence real to us and helps us to apply his message to our lives. Therefore, we are able to boast of God’s favor, even when we are suffering, because suffering can be used by God to build character.

Suffering should not be sought, and we should always work to relieve the suffering of others. But God is more interested in building our character than he is in making us comfortable. Sometimes suffering can be claimed as a gift or an opportunity that God has given us to mature spiritually and glorify God. People who have had to cope with chronic pain or illness over a long period of time at first try everything possible to rid themselves of the pain or illness. But, when there is no relief they learn to bear their burden with the Lord’s help. Eventually they begin to see along with the Apostle Paul that the power of Christ is experienced even in the midst of their infirmities. (2 Cor. 12:9)

June 10, 2007

Second Sunday after Pentecost

1 Kings 17:8-24; Psalm 146;
Galatians 1:11-24; Luke 7:11-17

Christ Revealed

Whenever there was a drought in the land, the Lord instructed Elijah to go and ask a certain widow for food. She barely had enough to feed herself and her son. But Elijah was a man of God who needed her help. In the process of helping him, she discovered that somehow the vessels in which she kept flour and oil miraculously proved to contain a never-ending supply, so that there was more than enough to prepare food for herself and her son and the prophet until the drought ended and more supplies for making food could be obtained. Then, the widow’s son died, and Elijah restored him to life.

In the New Testament, Jesus also restored a widow’s son to life and was, therefore, declared to be a great prophet. The people who witnessed this miracle must surely have been thinking of the miracle that Elijah performed. Christ is often revealed in the tough times of life to be our secret strength. He is the one who keeps us faithful to God’s will and purposes even when circumstances may serve to discourage us. In spite of many hardships, Paul could declare, “I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). Can you make such a bold declaration of faith in the midst of difficult times? Your world may have come apart at the seams. The foundations of your life may have crumbled beneath you. But the Lord is with you nevertheless. And Christ is revealed in the tough times that we face.

June 17, 2007

Third Sunday After Pentecost

1 Kings 21:1-21a; Psalm 5:1-8;
Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3

Living by Faith

A woman came forward to receive the bread and the cup during the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. As I handed her the bread, I said, “Jesus loves you. He died for you.” The expression on her face was one of total shock. It was as if for the first time in her life she realized that Jesus loved her. The idea that Jesus died on our behalf and that his sacrifice somehow makes a difference in our present life and our eternal destiny is at the heart of our faith.

A penitent woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her tears gave him an opportunity to tell his disciples that the one who has been forgiven the most will be the most loving and grateful. Following religious laws and customs is commendable, but expressing faith in Christ is more important than any other acts of obedience that we could manage. Do we trust in our own competence to obey God, or do we trust in Christ’s supreme example of obedience and his sacrifice on our behalf? Have we come the point in life where we trust Jesus more than we trust ourselves? Paul spoke of being crucified with Christ and yet alive, because Christ was living in him (Gal. 2:19-20). Can you say for certain that Christ lives in you?

At the close of a church business meeting, I asked, “Are there any other questions?” Seeking to make a joke, my young associate said, “What is the meaning of life?” I answered, “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain” (Phil.1). After all is said and done, being alive in Christ is the meaning of life.

June 24, 2007
Fourth Sunday after
Pentecost

1 Kings 19:1-15a; Psalm 42;
 Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

Our Name Is Legion

Hollywood has made a fortune producing movies that portray demonic activity and exorcisms. These macabre productions hold a strange fascination for many people. But in biblical times demonic activity was more than simply a fascinating subject. It was a very real threat.

One of my friends and ministry colleagues once asked, "Do you know what the number one social problem was in biblical times?" While I was trying to come up with a satisfactory answer he provided a surprisingly simple one himself. "Demons!" he shouted. "The people heard them howling in the desert and among the tombs. They saw people that were possessed and tormented, cutting themselves and bruising themselves, tearing off their clothes and running about uncontrollably. They were also afraid that they too might become possessed by demons."

Legion was a man who was tormented by so many demons that when Jesus removed them from him and put them in a herd of pigs the pigs rushed off a cliff and drowned in the lake. Later, people saw the man who called himself Legion, clothed and in his right mind, sitting at Jesus' feet. The tormented man had been delivered from his tormentors and was now free to live a wholesome and sane life.

We probably haven't had any experience with demonic activity, other than the kind portrayed in movies or described in novels, but we do know what it means to be tormented by conflicting roles and expectations. Whenever what Jesus expects becomes our top priority, then we are less disturbed by other conflicting desires and expectations.

July 1, 2007
Fifth Sunday after
Pentecost

2 Kgs. 2:1-2, 6-14; Ps. 77:1-2, 11-20;
 Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

Christ Sets Us Free

My cousin's husband is a gifted storyteller. He has a way of telling stories that

get listeners caught up in the narrative. He once told me, "There was this man who became convinced that if he had faith he could move mountains. So he went down to the banks of the river near his home, stretched forth his hands and said, 'In the name of Jesus I command you waters to part.' And do you know what happened?" I was so completely caught up in his story that I expected him to describe a miracle of some kind. But after a few moments of silence, he said, "They didn't part!" He had tricked me by drawing me into his story.

On three occasions in the Bible the waters parted as a demonstration of God's power: (1) When the Israelites were being pursued by Pharaoh's army and they came to the shores of the sea (Exod.14:21-22); (2) when Joshua led the Israelites across the Jordan River into the Promised Land (Josh. 3:7-17); and (3) when Elijah crossed the Jordan accompanied by Elisha (2 Kings 2:6-8).

Paul spoke of the freedom that Christ gives us to love our neighbors as ourselves and results in the fruit of the Spirit that enables us to express love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). Miraculously parting the waters of a river or sea may seem impossible, but enjoying the freedom that Christ gives us to produce spiritual fruit is even more of a challenge. And yet Christ sets us free to do exactly that.

July 8, 2007
Sixth Sunday after
Pentecost

2 Kings 5:1-4; Psalm 30; Galatians
 6:1-16;
 Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Operating Under a Divine Mandate

When Jesus sent out the seventy there was a sense of urgency about their mission. They were not allowed to take any excess baggage of any kind, not even a change of clothes. They were to eat whatever was offered to them and focus on healing the sick and the proclamation of the arrival of God's kingdom. When they returned they reported to Jesus that even demons obeyed them in his name. They were in danger of being overly impressed with their own success. So,

Jesus reminded them that he had seen Satan fall from heaven because he had an exaggerated view of his own importance (Luke 11:17).

Naaman was the commander of Aramean army. He was a successful military leader, but he also had leprosy. When he heard that a prophet in Israel might be able to heal him he went with an entourage and expensive gifts to find this man of God. The prophet sent a messenger to meet Naaman and to tell him to wash seven times in the Jordan River if he wanted to be cured. Naaman protested that he had better rivers in his own country. But one of his servants persuaded him to swallow his pride and do as he had been instructed. Whenever he bathed in the Jordan he was cleansed of his leprosy.

The spiritual power and authority of the seventy lay in their having been sent forth by Jesus as his emissaries. The healing of Naaman's leprosy depended upon his willingness to obey God. Whenever we are operating under a divine mandate good things are the eventual result.

July 15, 2007 Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Amos 7:7-17; Psalm 82; Colossians
1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

What Must I Do?

It is often easier to know God's will in any given situation than it is for us to obey it. Although certain situations are not specifically covered in scripture, there are sufficient principles outlined in the sacred texts to give us some indication of what God wants us to do.

A man asked Jesus what he must do to receive eternal life. Jesus asked him if he as familiar with the Commandments. The man cited love for God and love for neighbor, perhaps because Jesus had said that these were the greatest commandments that provided the foundation for all the rest (Matt. 22:36-40). Whenever the man sought to identify the neighbor that he was to love, Jesus told him the parable of the Good Samaritan. The neighbor that we are to love is the one that needs our love, or its practical expression through our words and deeds. The neighbor that we are to

love is also the one who has shown love to us when we were in need.

Amos, a herdsman and a tree trimmer, was given a prophetic message for God's people. He had seen a vision of a plumb line that had serious implications. A plumb line is dropped from the top of a wall or the corner of a building in order to determine if the wall or building is straight. If it leans it will be "out of plumb" and subject to falling. Moses Law, the prophets' messages and Jesus' teachings serve as spiritual plumb lines that help us know whether we are in line with God's will and purposes.

July 22, 2007 Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Amos 8:1-12; Psalm 52; Colossians
1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

Is There Any Hope?

People cannot live very long without hope. Whenever a doctor gives people tragic news of a serious illness, the first thing they usually do is ask, "Is there any hope?" Where there is life there is hope

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and where there is hope there is life. Hope makes us come alive and gives us the enthusiasm and creativity to tackle even seemingly unsolvable problems. Hope is what makes us get up, dust ourselves off and begin anew, whenever we have been struck down on the highway of life.

The Apostle Paul said to the followers of Jesus in the young churches that hope is the product of the fulfillment of God's secret plan that had been previously kept hidden. That hope is "Christ in you the hope of glory" (Col.1:27). Because of Jesus we know that in spite of outward appearances there is still hope. Even when we draw our last breath there is still hope. Even when our loved ones close their eyes in death, there is still hope.

When Jesus visited Martha and Mary, Martha was busy preparing a meal for her guests. But Mary sat at his feet with the other men, basking in his presence and eagerly listening to his teachings. Martha wanted Jesus to scold Mary and tell her to help prepare the meal. But Jesus told Martha that Mary had chosen the one thing necessary. What Martha was doing was very important. But what Mary was

doing was essential to her soul's survival. By keeping in touch with Jesus and his teachings she was cultivating hope.

July 29, 2007 Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Hosea 1:2-10; Psalm 85; Colossians
2:6-19; Luke 11:1-13

Teach Me to Pray

I have been a praying person as far back as I can remember. Prayer has characteristically been my primary coping strategy. I have preached, taught seminars and workshops, and also written articles and books on the subject of prayer. And yet there are times when I feel like I am only a beginner in the school of prayer.

When Jesus prayed things happened that otherwise would not have happened: the sick were healed, the spiritually oppressed were liberated, sins were forgiven, the multitudes were fed and the dead were raised to life. Prayer was a top priority in Jesus' earthly life. He got up early and stayed up late to pray.

Therefore his disciples asked him to teach them to pray.

Most of them had grown up in Jewish homes and had been taught how to pray in the customary manner of the Jews. But what they were saying to Jesus was, "Teach us to pray the way that you do, with your enthusiasm for prayer and with the remarkable results that we have seen you get." It was not just instruction in the ways of prayer, but the motivation to always pray and the power that was released whenever Jesus prayed that they wanted to experience. He began by telling them to relate to God as their heavenly Father, and closed by telling them that the greatest gift God could give those who seek his help was the gift of the Holy Spirit.

It is the Spirit that helps us when we do not know how to pray (Rom. 8:26).

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NEXT INTENSIVE: August 13-17, 2007

Women in Ministry: Reconcilers, Reformers and Revolutionaries

Focus groups: *Abused Women and the Response of Churches and Faith-based Organizations, Collaborative Leadership in the 21st Century, Congregational Development and Church Administration in an Urban Setting, Disability and Health Care, Exploring Systemic Approaches to Congregational and Community Transformation, Ministry to Those Affected by the Criminal Justice System, Preaching and Leadership, and Spirituality, Wellness, and Society*



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