

SERMON

STARTERS

John E. Harnish

October 3, 2004
18th Sunday after Pentecost

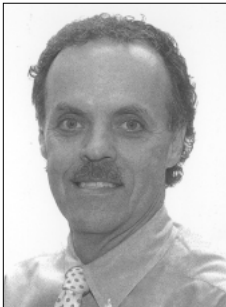
Ps 137; Lam 1:1-6
2 Tim 1:1-14; Lk 17:5-10

When All You Have Is a Song

Somewhere I heard the story of an exhausted pastor. Two difficult deaths touching a broad cross-section of the congregation had drained him as he prepared for Sunday worship. The emergency room nurse had been involved with both deaths along with the assorted array of triage and tragedy. In worship the preacher noticed she sang her heart out on every hymn. After worship he said, "You were really getting into the hymns this morning." With tears in her tired eyes she said, "You know, sometimes all you have is a song."

The people of Israel were cut off from the temple, the center of their faith. Their captors taunted, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion." The despairing response was "How can we sing the Lord's song in this foreign land?" When life mocks our faith, when the ground on which we stand feels like foreign land and our voice has been hushed to a whisper, sometimes all we have is the song. But the song is enough.

Of course, the song you choose to sing makes all the difference. I felt I was in a foreign land when I heard Toby Keith sing, "Uncle Sam's got you on the top of his list, and the Statue of Liberty is raising her fist". I wanted to shout, "I beg to differ!" The statue raises a lamp



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not a fist and her song is still "Give me your tired, your poor." Sometimes all we have is the song. But if the song is rooted in the covenant of the God of Zion, the song is enough.

October 10, 2004
19th Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 17:11-19; Ps 66: 8 & 12
Jer 29:1, 4-7

One Returned

Don't overlook the fact that Jesus gave them what they asked for. The lepers cried out to Jesus, he heard their plea and he healed them. Jesus seems understandably amazed that only one bothered to say "Thanks." My years of living in the South taught me that bad theology is one thing, but bad manners are totally unacceptable. Even more surprising, the one who did come back was a "foreigner" (maybe even a Yankee!). It's a real slap in the face to Jesus' upright, uptight, well-bred religious audience that a foreigner (probably a hated Samaritan) showed more appreciation than one of their "own kind." They asked. He answered. And only one returned to give thanks.

In an old sermon I found a story without a footnote, so I can't give appropriate thanks either. It comes from the Vietnam War era. The parents of a boy killed in the war presented a substantial gift to their church in his memory. The mother of another young soldier heard of it and suggested to her husband that they do the same. He protested, "Why should we? Our son returned home." She responded, "That's the point...he did come home."

"Bless our God, O peoples", says the Psalmist. "We went through fire and through water; yet thou hast brought us forth to a spacious place." Return and give thanks.

October 17, 2004
20th Sunday after Pentecost

II Timothy 3:14-4:5
Jer 31:27-34; Ps 119:97-104 or Ps 19

A Day of Itching Ears

A day of itching ears—the desire for titillating ideas, fascinating teachers, or the latest theological widget. For St. Paul it was speculative Gnostic theology. For us it may be the easy answers of TV preachers or the circular reasoning of self-centered politicians, but the ears are itching for sure.

What do you do in a day of itching ears? First, Paul tells Timothy, "Hold on to the truth. Stay centered in the Word. Be clear about what you believe." A funny thing happened as I typed this sentence. The question mark is just below the quotation mark on my keyboard. I slipped and it came out "Be clear about what you believe?" Too often we put a question mark where a quotation mark should be. A day of itching ears calls for clarity about faith rooted in the Word.

Second, Paul says, "Get to work. Do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry." In a day of itching ears the church confirms the message we proclaim by the ministry we live. This is no time be debating the number of angels on the head of a pin. It is a time to live out our calling in sturdy, tangible ways. In a day of itching ears, perhaps actions do speak louder than words, or at least perhaps they will be heard above the itching.

Oct. 24, 2004
21st Sunday after Pentecost

Joel 2:23-32; Ps 65
2 Tim 4:6-8, 16-18; Lk 18:9-14

The Year of the Locust

"This is certainly a ghastly time to be alive." That's the opening line of Harry Emerson Fosdick's classic World War II

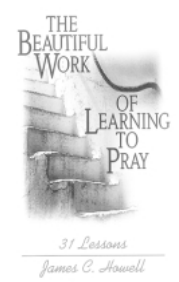
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sermon. He said "Behind the stirring headlines that narrate the clash of armies and the march of victory, an unheralded mass of human misery exists, the likes of which our earth has seldom seen." It was ghastly. Yet, he titles his sermon 'A Great Time to Be Alive'. (Fosdick, A Great Time To Be Alive, 1944, page 1).

I don't know much about locusts, those hungry little buggers that could destroy every plant in sight. However, I do know about the "year the locust devoured". I've seen the swarming cloud of depression, the spreading plague of prejudice, the devouring hordes of war and desolation built upon flimsy "intelligence". Yet in the "year the locust devoured", Joel tells the people to be glad and rejoice in the hope of God's ultimate redemption. The year of the locust may be a ghastly time, but it is also a great time to be alive.

Fosdick says, "Life's restful days we love, but other days come too—great days that require not ease, but adequacy." Even in the year of the locust, God's people rejoice and to rely on the promise that 'God is in the midst of them...and will restore the years the swarming locusts have eaten.'

October 31, 2004 22nd Sunday after Pentecost

Lk 19:1-10; Hab 1:1-4; 2:1-4
Ps 119:137-144; 2 Thess 1:1-4, 11-12

Patron Saint of the Rich

It's usually a children's tale and it works because it's about a little man who climbed a tree, complete with song and hand motions. It teaches kids about the joy of meeting Jesus and inviting him into our lives. Unfortunately, we tend to leave Zacchaeus in kindergarten, never bothered by the inescapable implications of this very adult story for our stewardship.

This guy had it all. When Jesus entered his home his reaction is not just to give fairly or even generously but exuberantly—giving away half of his possessions and if he had cheated anyone repaying them four-fold! It is the story of the immense good a wealthy person can do when they open their hearts and

homes to Christ. He is the "Patron Saint of the Rich" because when a person of means catches a vision they can make a great difference in the world.

Most of our people would rather hear about the widow who gave two coins. Overlooking the fact it was all she had, we identify with her to justify our meager gifts. Yet we American Christians are more like Zacchaeus than the widow and if we can learn to give not just fairly, or generously, but exuberantly, we could change the world. If we are going to pray to a patron saint, let it be Zacchaeus.

Nov. 1, 2004 All Saints Day

Eph 1:11-23; Dan 7:1-3, 15-18
Ps 149 or Ps 150

Adopted Inheritance

The beginning of St. Paul's Ephesians letter is really about the end. It's about our inheritance in Christ, the promise of the glory of final redemption, when we will share in the "riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints."

Most of us are so busy trying to make it through this day that we spend little time thinking about inheriting the kingdom some day. But especially on All Saints Day we look ahead and claim the promise of the final triumph and our inheritance "to the praise of His glory."

The key to the amazing wonder of this passage comes in verse 5. In the KJV he uses the word "adoption." Whereas inheritances in Paul's day would have gone only to the first born, God's bequest goes to all who have been "adopted" by their redemption in Christ.

My wife is an adopted child. She says as a little girl her favorite bedtime story was about the mom and dad who wanted a little girl so much they went to this place with row after row of babies in cribs and finally spotted one little girl with curly hair and said "That one...that's the one we want to be our child." Whether or not that's how it actually happened, St. Paul would understand. God chose us, God destined us to be His children, and God adopted us to receive the eternal inheritance, to the praise of His glory.

Nov. 7, 2004
24th Sunday after Pentecost

Hag 1:15-2:9; Ps 145:1-5, 17-21
2 Thess 2:1-5, 13-17; Lk 20:27-38

With a Name Like That...

In recent years we have seen a rise in the popularity of Old Testament names for new-borns—Jeremiah, Jacob, Zechariah—but I have yet to hear of anyone choosing to name their darling baby boy after Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel. He was the governor no less, not the one you would necessarily expect to be responsive to the word of a prophet like Haggai. And yet, at this particular turning point in the history of the Hebrew people, good 'ol Zerb fills a crucial role in the rebuilding of the temple and the reclaiming of the faith. He is the one who hears God's call through the prophet Haggai and motivates the people to accomplish the task. Even with a name like that, God used him to inspire and lead the construction project.

Throughout the Biblical narrative, God has a way of using some of the most

unlikely people to fulfill His purposes. The Bible is full of people like Bezalel, the first architect for the tabernacle and the first person the Bible says was "filled with the spirit" (Exodus 35:31) and Oholiab, the construction manager. God works through a prostitute like Rahab and even Balaam's donkey to communicate the message and fulfill the vision.

I am not quite ready to name my first-born after Zerubbabel, but if God can use someone with a name like that....

Nov. 14, 2004
25th Sunday after Pentecost

II Thes 3:6-13; Lk 21:5-19
Isa 65:17-25 Isa 12 or Ps 118

No Bread for Busy-bodies

Two contrasting images in this passage: The phrase "living in idleness, mere busy-bodies", reminds me of Aunt Pittypat in "Gone with the Wind". Flitting around totally flustered, running in circles and finally running out of flaming Atlanta, she is

useless to Scarlet and the needs of her besieged city. I fear Aunt Pittypat is still with us; people who stay busy with church business but when it comes to actually carrying out the "Great Commission" and Christ's ministry they are practically useless. St. Paul says there is no bread for them.

The second image is exactly the opposite: those who are "weary in well-doing". Compassion fatigue sets in when problems seem insurmountable and we are simply tired of "doing good"; when daily deaths in Iraq cause no twinge of remorse; when AIDS in Africa fails to touch us; when millions are living without knowing Jesus Christ and we don't care.

St. Paul calls both to the task. Mere busybodies need to get their bodies in gear and fulfill their ministry. And the weary need a new filling of Christ's spirit, who "...seeing the crowds, had compassion on them."

When Jimmy Carter was asked why he does what he does his answer sounded like John Wesley: "My faith demands...that I do whatever I can, wherever I can, for as long as I can to try to make a difference." (*NY Times Magazine*, Jan. 29, 1995, p. 30)

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