

The Warning that Motivates Us

As we come together on this 101st Anniversary Sunday, we are in a much different place than we were last year this time. Last year we were all geared up to celebrate 100 years of ministry. We had picture albums prepared, special music invited, a grand banquet planned. There was a lot of excitement and a lot of forward momentum, even though we were looking backward. We were also inspired by the 40 days of Purpose Campaign, and the small groups and the new people who were a part of those groups.

Indeed, 2006 turned out to be a very good year. Attendance was up, our spiritual juices were up; and, by the end of the year, finances were up as well. We sailed through Christmas with a great deal of joy and optimism for the future. Then came January 2007.

Although January weather was unusually mild and we didn't have snow to contend with, church attendance went flat. We were kind of like a bottle of soda pop left out too long with the lid off. Much of the "pop" was gone. I think maybe we were just taking a breather after all the activity of 2006. Then came February 2007.

It was a deep freeze that ended just yesterday. There was ice and snow that came just at the wrong time for services. Church attendance and the revival spirit were further eroded. We had to spend more money than we took in. Demons of doubt and fear began to gnaw at the edges of my faith. The devil hissed to me that he would pay us back for the success we enjoyed in 2006. And, I suppose, at least in terms of nickels and noses, he may be able to do just that. It looks like 2007 is going to be a down year compared with 2006. But only the Lord knows for sure.

It seems to me that this Anniversary Sunday is time to take stock and regroup. What I've discovered over the years is that when things get shaky and you don't know exactly what to do, it's always a good idea to get back to basics. According to our Scripture lessons for this morning, there are four basics we may need to revisit and take action on.

The first thing we need to remember is the basic Lenten theme I touched on last Sunday. We need to remember our absolute dependence on the Lord. We are dust and to the dust we will return as individuals. It is only the Lord who makes us alive and only the Lord who will give us life in the future. And, as a Church--guess what? **We are dust.** It is only the Lord who makes us alive and only the Lord who will give us life in the future. The danger of last

year's success is that we could come to believe that we did that on our own and now we have it made and that we can just "coast" into the future. Listen to Isaiah 55:1: The Lord says through Isaiah: "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."

The point that comes through here is that we have no capital. We bring nothing to the table. We don't want to admit it but we are paupers and beggars all before the Lord. We are the thirsty and the hungry and we have nothing with which to pay for the provisions we need. The first basic thing we need to remember is that the Lord resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. We need to humble ourselves before Him and freely admit that we are desperate for His help. Without Him this whole enterprise is nothing but dust. The Fourth Street Church of God is dust.

The second thing we need to remember as we regroup this morning is that though we are dust the Lord can make us live so long as we are willing to come to Him and seek Him as our Source. Ezekiel was shown a valley full of dry dusty bones, very dry bones, and the Spirit asked Ezekiel a question: "Son of man, can these bones live again?" Ezekiel said, "Lord, You know." The answer was a resounding "yes." And, then the bones began to shake and rattle, and they came together and were covered with flesh, and the breath of the Lord blew into their nostrils and they stood up, the Scripture says, "an exceeding great army." Ezekiel's vision was a promise to the nation of Israel and a lasting promise to the Church of Jesus Christ.

The resurrection we seek, however, may take a little time. Jim Smith is my neighbor and last week Jim was having trouble with his van. Although the garage had recently installed a new alternator, his battery was still pretty dead--too dead on Wednesday to start the engine. I gave him a jump, and the engine would run as long as the jumper cables were attached to my truck. But the engine wouldn't keep running on it's own. So we charged the battery. After several minutes of charging, the battery would start the engine but it couldn't keep it running. I advised Jim to let it on the charger for two hours and try it again. After two hours the engine started but again, when Jim pushed in the gas pedal and asked it to run faster, the engine died. It still didn't have enough juice to keep going. Finally, Jim let the charger on the battery over night. On Thursday, his van started and kept on running.

We need to recharge our spiritual batteries and recharge them long enough and strongly enough to keep our spiritual engines running. Isaiah 55:2b-3 say, "Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live." The instructions to delight ourselves in the rich food of the Lord's table and to come to the Lord and listen to Him, convey the idea of spending time in His presence. To delight oneself in food is to savor it, to eat it slowly and to allow the aroma, texture, and taste of that food to fill one's senses. It's not fast food, not "drive-through" communion. Likewise, to "listen" to the Lord conveys the idea of taking the time to listen carefully and thoughtfully to every thing He says, to savor every word and take it to heart.

Psalms 63:1-8 show us how the psalmist spent time in the Lord's presence.

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name. My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

We notice that the psalmist was aware of his desperate need for God; and, like Isaiah, speaks of it in terms of hunger and thirst. He speaks of beholding the power and glory of the Lord in the Temple, something he did regularly and something that required an investment of time. Again, he speaks of his spiritual nourishment in terms of a rich feast, not fast food. He also gives time to thinking about the Lord and meditating on the Lord in the watches of the night. He says that his soul "clings" to the Lord. **Charging our spiritual batteries requires investing time in His presence.**

So far, we have seen we need to regroup by coming to the Lord humbly and with a commitment to invest whatever time is needed to be re-charged with His Spirit. A third thing we need to do is to remember and re-connect to our mission. What is that mission? Look at Isaiah 55:3b-5, "listen, so I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the

peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.”

In other words, the Israelites were to be God’s light to the nations. They were to be connected to God in such an intimate way that they could be used to connect other peoples with God also.

And in our Scripture from Luke 3:6-9, Jesus tells the following parable: ““A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'”

The bottom line in this scary little parable is that the people of God are to bear fruit for the kingdom of God. Our mission, like Israel’s mission, is to shine with the presence of the Lord to the degree that other people are attracted to His light. The church that does not attract and win others for the kingdom is wasting space and we are in danger of the Lord’s judgment. **We need to remember and reconnect with our mission. We need to rekindle our passion to connect others with Christ.**

We need to come humbly before the Lord and spend time in His presence, soaking up His Spirit. We need to remember and reconnect with our mission. And, last but not least this morning, we need to repent from any thought or action that stands in the way of our being close to the Lord or that could hinder our testimony for Him. Isaiah 55:6-9 say:

Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Leading into the Parable of the unfruitful fig tree, Jesus gives examples of people who were killed by the brutality of the Roman occupiers of Palestine and those killed when a tower fell on them.

His punch line is repeated in verses 3 and 5: “unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

The premise of Isaiah 55 and Luke 13 is one in the same: Where God’s blessing is withheld from the church, we must consider the possibility that there is sin in the church. Again, we search our hearts in the presence of the Lord? Are we holding unkind thoughts toward anyone else in this body? Are we saying things that ought not be said? Are we knowingly doing things we know to be sinful? Are we disobeying the Lord in how we use our time, our possessions, or our money? Are we failing to hold up our end of the bargain in our families or to show God’s love to our neighbors? If so, the path to new life runs through repentance. We must confess our sins to the Lord and take His assistance to turn from them. **If we cling to our sins, we will forfeit God’s blessing.**

Anniversary Sunday, 2006 was a day to celebrate. Today is a day to spiritually regroup and to begin a new leg of our journey with Jesus. It is a time to humble ourselves, a time to seek a fresh encounter with the risen Lord and to recharge our spiritual batteries, a time to remember and to reconnect with our mission, a time to repent from anything that has led us astray.

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Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

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