

Date: Sunday May 9, 2010

Scripture: Acts 16:9-15

Title: “The Wardrobe of Life”

The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): Paul had to make many course corrections throughout his ministry but he stayed focused on God and God stayed focused on him.

The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): In the face of closed doors, detours, and disruptions that we encounter we can count on God’s loving presence to nudge us forward and help us discover just who we are, what we are created to do, and where we are meant to go.

(Remember, it’s all about God!)

It’s one of my favorite moments from the highlights of the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson. This clip comes from the 1960’s and Johnny had Bob Hope, Dean Martin, and George Goebel on his show. How’s that for a line-up of guests? The four of them, along with Ed McMahon are just laughing it up and having a good time all the while Dean Martin is flicking cigarette ashes into George Goebel’s cup. Now everyone, audience included, is in on the joke, except poor George. He knows something is going on, but he is not quite sure what’s happening. He knows that there are laughs occurring at his expense, but he doesn’t know why. Finally he declares, “Do you ever feel like all the world is a black tuxedo and you are a brown pair of shoes? He brought the house down!

Life is like that for us sometimes. We’re the shoes that don’t match up with any outfit. We’re out of place and uncomfortable. In spite of trying to make the best and most thought out decisions, things don’t always work out right for us.

Sometimes the pieces don't quite fit together. Like the best laid plans of mice and men and mice and women, our efforts go astray. When that happens, we feel pinched and squeezed. It's like being on the road to nowhere. We don't know what happened to our dreams. But we do know how disappointed we are when the dreams dissipate.

It was kind of like that for the Apostle Paul in the story we've read from Acts today. It is easy to think of Paul as the one who is absolutely certain about what he is to do and where he is to go next. But here we see him taking wrong turns. Here is a Paul who doesn't see the way he should go. Here is a Paul whose plans and dreams don't work out. Here is a Paul who goes off in one direction, is forbidden by the Holy Spirit, tries another option, and gets stopped in his tracks again.

And yet, it seems that Paul just takes all that in stride. He keeps going. He turns in another direction; he has a vision, and from there on its smooth sailing. He's off to Macedonia. And with that the Gospel is preached for the first time in Europe.

When we look at a passage like this, it can be a bit frustrating. The scripture passage can make it all seem so simple. It could make us think that the Apostle Paul must have been getting e-mail from God while we're still stuck waiting for snail mail from God. It's not always so easy for us to know what God's way is for us. It's not always so easy to hear the voice of God, or to experience God's presence in the middle of our life situations which get away from us and become hotbeds of confusion.

Well, maybe it wasn't always so easy for Paul either. Paul was not a patient man. The scriptural accounts often picture him running from one place to the next, almost like a man who is driven by the demands of the urgent. Maybe Paul felt the same kind of frustration we feel when our plans turn sour. Perhaps he was wondering why at times, when he tried so hard to do God's work, nothing seemed to work. Yet, he still found a way to do the work he was called to do.

What this story from Acts does make plain for us is that sometimes we can hear God's voice in a "no" as well as a "yes." Often it is through the closed doors and the broken dreams, the discouragement and the disappointment of life that God comes to us to correct our direction and to turn us toward a new way or a new place. How often I hear someone say after something good happened that God was acting in that event. Well folks, it is in the unexpected, the challenging, and the disruptions that we can know God's presence as well in new and enlightening ways.

Almost daily there are little interruptions and changes of plans that seem designed to frustrate us. It may not be the Spirit of God we see in our path or upon our road. What we see instead may be the broken down car when we had everything loaded and the trip so carefully mapped out. What we see instead may be the child who breaks out with chicken pox just hours before the family reunion. What we may see instead of the Spirit of God standing there at the closed door is our frustration that our best laid plans for the day have been so rudely interrupted. It's time for a good pout.

If it is not just some small interruption, but something important in our lives

that gets changed unexpectedly, it's even worse. We can lose a job that we loved, a marriage can fall apart, a business venture goes bust, and we feel like a failure. The death of a loved one can fill us with pain, loss, and loneliness. Illness can rack our lives. Then, it's time for crying.

The scripture lesson teaches us that it is precisely at times such as these, though, that we do need to open our eyes and see that the Spirit of God is with us. Often it is in the midst of disappointments, discouragements, closed doors, broken dreams, failures, and losses of life that God comes to whisper in our ear. So very often we can reflect back at those times and see that God was there in some way, teaching us something or protecting us from harm or simply nudging us to go in another direction. What we need to do is to learn to recognize the Spirit of God sooner and see that God is with us through the whole journey of life, the broken down cars, the sick children, the difficult relationships, the losses, and the feelings of failure, as well as the good things (Hearn).

Janice Hearn writes that what we also see in this lesson is the role of prayer in finding direction in our lives at times of chaos and redefining the way we pray at such times. Many of us have learned well the lessons of prayer asking God for what we want, praying for those who are in need, and giving God praise and thanks for the good things of life. Some of us have learned to love silent prayer and the wonder of doing nothing other than simply being quiet before God. Prayer is all that and that's good. But prayer is more.

Prayer is also about action. It is about stepping out, wrestling, and struggling

with the closed doors and the disappointments of life. It's about cultivating all the while praying for a good crop. When Paul is stopped in his tracks, he doesn't waste time. He picks himself up and goes in another direction. It is through the process of struggle, reaching out, and the trying of the doorknobs that Paul finally plots his course. When I am having days that I feel out of sorts, when my wardrobe of life doesn't match up, I usually find I have deviated from my prayer habits. Returning to prayer helps me get centered. I would suggest that the very first action of prayer is the act of praying.

I read about a young woman named Cathy who spent her first year out of college working with an organization doing ministry in the inner city. In a newsletter to those who supported her ministry, Cathy wrote about her prayer life and that she was beginning to pray for interruptions. She told of results of some of the interruptions in her ministry and how they became an opportunity to touch people's lives with the love of Christ.

One unexpected phone call brought a group of youth who were traveling and somehow their motel reservations had become lost. They had nowhere to stay. Cathy told how they housed the entire group for the night, sending them out to the homes of church people where they were fed and cared for with love.

She went on to share stories of meeting with people who are on drugs or whose lives are confused, fractured and hurting; and of sitting on a park bench with people for hours at a time trying to show these hurting people that God does care about them personally (Hearn).

Perhaps we, like Cathy, need to learn to pray for interruptions. Real life is uncomfortable at times. We so often feel out of place and clumsy. Life is full of well-laid plans that get messed up, things that go wrong, and the monkey wrench gets thrown. When that happens we have a choice; we can curl up in a corner or we can see that God is with us ready to correct our course, a little here and a little there, along the way.

In fact, today's good news of God is that in the face of interruptions, changes of plans, closed doors, detours, and disruptions we can count on God's loving presence to embrace us, nudge us forward, and help us discover just who we are, what we are created to do, and where we are meant to go. I'm not saying that God causes havoc just to get our attention, but that when difficulties occur, God is there; a whispering voice soothing our hurts and correcting our course so that we are in the right place at the right time.

You know, maybe ole' lonesome George Goebel was on to something. Black tuxedos and brown shoes just might be the next big thing. In the world of 21st Century fashion anything goes and in God's world anything is possible. Doesn't that sound like a great combination. Give thanks to God and let us pray.

Holy One,

It's not so much what we wear but who we are; your children blessed by you at all times. We trust in you our rock and refuge. Through the strength of your presence with us, we can be a stronger presence for others. Thank you for making that

possible. This we pray, Amen.

Offering: This offering time is not unexpected. Let us give with joy and thanksgiving for all that is given to us. The ushers will please . . .

Dedication: Accept and bless this that we give and show us how to use the gifts in honor of your powerful presence. This we pray. Amen.

Benediction: We have been blessed here and now our presence is needed in unexpected places. Go forth in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with us always. Amen and Amen.

Sources:

Hearn, Janice W.; Lectionary Homiletics; www.goodpreacher.com; 2010.