

II Timothy 4:6-22
October 24, '10

“COME BEFORE WINTER”

IN THE MID-1950'S, THE GREAT NEWSCASTER WALTER CRONKITE HOSTED A TELEVISION SERIES ENTITLED, “*YOU ARE THERE.*”

IT WAS A SHOW THAT FOCUSED ON MAJOR WORLD EVENTS & GAVE YOU THE OPPORTUNITY TO FEEL AS THOUGH YOU WERE REALLY PRESENT TO EXPERIENCE THOSE EVENTS.

WE ALL – ON RARE OCCASIONS – HAVE THE LITERAL EXPERIENCE OF “BEING THERE” AT BIG EVENTS. LIKE YOU – I’VE HAD SOME OF THOSE OPPORTUNITIES.

WHEN I THINK BACK ON SOME OF THE MAJOR EVENTS I’VE BEEN ABLE TO EXPERIENCE, THERE ARE SEVERAL THAT COME TO MIND.

I WAS THERE IN OLYMPIA STADIUM IN DETROIT WHEN GORDIE HOWE SCORED HIS 545TH GOAL TO MAKE HIM – AT THE TIME – THE ALL-TIME LEADING SCORER IN NATIONAL HOCKEY LEAGUE HISTORY.

I WAS THERE AT CHURCHILL DOWNS WHEN SECRETARIAT – ARGUABLY THE GREATEST RACE HORSE EVER - WON THE KENTUCKY DERBY.

EMMA SUE & I WERE THERE WHEN AFFIRMED – THE LAST TRIPLE CROWN WINNER – WON THE DERBY.

I WAS THERE OUTSIDE BUCKINGHAM PALACE ON THE DAY THAT PRINCE CHARLES & PRINCESS DIANA WERE MARRIED & WATCHED AS CAMERAS CAPTURED THAT ICONIC KISS FROM THE BALCONY.

ONE EVENT THAT I WISH I COULD HAVE EXPERIENCED IS THE DELIVERY OF ONE OF THE MOST WELL-KNOWN & FREQUENTLY QUOTED SERMONS OF THE 20TH CENTURY – CLARENCE MACARTNEY’S “COME BEFORE WINTER.”

MACARTNEY’S INITIAL PRESENTATION OF THAT SERMON WAS AT THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN PITTSBURGH IN THE FALL OF 1915.

IT WAS SO ENTHUSIASTICALLY RECEIVED THAT HE WAS ASKED TO PREACH IT AGAIN & EVERY FALL FOR NEARLY 40 DECADES – CLARENCE MACARTNEY PREACHED THAT SERMON.

THOUGH I NEVER HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE PRESENT WHEN MACARTNEY DELIVERED THAT SERMON, I HAVE READ IT & HEARD RECORDINGS OF IT MANY TIMES.

IT’S A MARVELOUS EXAMPLE OF THE WAY A FEW SEEMINGLY INSIGNIFICANT WORDS OF THE BIBLE CAN BE TRANSFORMED INTO A POWERFUL & CHALLENGING MESSAGE.

AS YOU LOOK AT THIS PASSAGE, YOU MIGHT FIND THAT SEVERAL CONCEPTS OR IDEAS POP OUT AT YOU.

BUT WHAT CLARENCE MCARTNEY FINDS IMPORTANT COULD EASILY BE OVERLOOKED.

HE ZEROES IN ON PAUL’S LITTLE 3-WORD PLEA TO TIMOTHY TO “COME BEFORE WINTER.”

IT HAS TAKEN ME MORE THAN 30 YEARS TO EVEN VENTURE AN ATTEMPT TO SHARE MACARTNEY’S ACTUAL SERMON.

LISTEN TO A PORTION OF IT – NOT THE WHOLE THING, BUT BITS & PIECES OF THAT UNFORGETTABLE SERMON.

HERE'S WHAT CLARENCE MACARTNEY SAYS ABOUT THIS PASSAGE:

PAUL'S LAST LETTER IS TO THIS DEAREST OF HIS FRIENDS, TIMOTHY, WHOM HE HAS LEFT IN CHARGE OF THE CHURCH AT FAR-OFF EPHESUS.

HE TELLS TIMOTHY THAT HE WANTS HIM TO COME AND BE WITH HIM AT ROME.

HE IS TO STOP AT TROAS ON THE WAY AND PICK UP HIS BOOKS, FOR PAUL IS A SCHOLAR EVEN TO THE END.

HE IS TO BRING THE CLOAK, TOO, WHICH PAUL HAD LEFT AT THE HOUSE OF CARPUS IN TROAS.

WHAT A ROBE THE CHURCH WOULD WEAVE FOR PAUL TODAY IF IT HAD THAT OPPORTUNITY!

BUT THIS IS THE ONLY ROBE THAT PAUL POSSESSES.

IT HAS BEEN WET WITH THE BRINE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN, WHITE WITH THE SNOWS OF GALATIA, YELLOW WITH THE DUST OF THE EGNATIAN WAY AND CRIMSON WITH THE BLOOD OF HIS WOUNDS FOR THE SAKE OF CHRIST.

IT IS GETTING COLD AT ROME, FOR THE SUMMER IS WANING, AND PAUL WANTS HIS ROBE TO KEEP HIM WARM.

BUT MOST OF ALL PAUL WANTS TIMOTHY TO BRING HIMSELF.

"DO THY DILIGENCE TO COME SHORTLY UNTO ME," HE WRITES; AND THEN, JUST BEFORE THE CLOSE OF THE LETTER, HE SAYS, "DO THY DILIGENCE TO COME BEFORE WINTER."

WHY "BEFORE WINTER?"

BECAUSE WHEN WINTER SET IN, THE SEASON FOR NAVIGATION CLOSED IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AND IT WAS DANGEROUS FOR SHIPS TO VENTURE OUT TO SEA.

HOW DANGEROUS IT WAS, THE STORY OF PAUL'S LAST SHIPWRECK TELLS US.

IF TIMOTHY WAITS UNTIL WINTER, HE WILL HAVE TO WAIT UNTIL SPRING; AND PAUL HAS A PREMONITION THAT HE WILL NOT LAST OUT THE WINTER, FOR HE SAYS, "THE TIME OF MY DEPARTURE IS AT HAND."

BEFORE WINTER OR NEVER!

THERE ARE SOME THINGS WHICH WILL NEVER BE DONE UNLESS THEY ARE DONE "BEFORE WINTER."

THE WINTER WILL COME AND THE WINTER WILL PASS, AND THE FLOWERS OF THE SPRINGTIME WILL DECK THE BREST OF THE EARTH, AND THE GRAVES OF SOME OF OUR OPPORTUNITIES, PERHAPS THE GRAVE OF OUR DEAREST FRIEND.

THERE ARE GOLDEN GATES WIDE OPEN ON THIS AUTUMN DAY, BUT NEXT OCTOBER THEY WILL BE FOREVER SHUT.

THERE ARE TIDES OF OPPORTUNITY RUNNING NOW AT THE FLOOD.

NEXT OCTOBER THEY WILL BE AT THE EBB.

THERE ARE VOICES SPEAKING TODAY WHICH A YEAR FROM TODAY WILL BE SILENT.

BEFORE WINTER OR NEVER!

I LIKE ALL SEASONS.

I LIKE WINTER WITH ITS CLEAR, COLD NIGHTS AND THE STARS LIKE SILVERHEADED NAILS DRIVEN INTO THE VAULT OF HEAVEN.

I LIKE SPRING WITH ITS GREEN GROWTH, ITS FLOWING STREAMS, ITS REVIRESCENT HOPE.

I LIKE SUMMER WITH THE LITANY OF GENTLE WINDS IN THE TOPS OF THE TREES, ITS LONG EVENINGS AND THE SONGS OF ITS BIRDS.

BUT BEST OF ALL I LIKE AUTUMN.

I LIKE ITS MIST AND HAZE, ITS COOL MORNING AIR, ITS FIELD STREWN WITH THE BLUE ASTER AND THE GOLDENROD; THE RADIANT LIVERY OF THE FORESTS—“YELLOW, AND BLACK, AND PALE, AND HECTIC RED.”

BUT HOW QUICKLY THE AUTUMN PASSES!

IT IS THE PERFECT PARABLE OF ALL THAT FADES. YESTERDAY I SAW THE FORESTS IN ALL THEIR SPLENDOR, AND SOLOMON IN ALL HIS GLORY WAS NOT ARRAYED LIKE ONE OF THESE.

BUT TOMORROW THE RAIN WILL FALL, THE WINDS WILL BLOW, AND THE TREES WILL BE STRIPPED AND BARREN.

THEREFORE, EVERY RETURNING AUTUMN BRINGS HOME TO ME THE SENSE OF THE PRECIOUSNESS OF LIFE'S OPPORTUNITIES - THEIR BEAUTY, BUT ALSO THEIR BREVITY.

IT FILLS ME WITH THE DESIRE TO SAY NOT MERELY SOMETHING ABOUT THE WAY THAT LEADS TO LIFE ETERNAL BUT, WITH THE HELP OF GOD, SOMETHING WHICH SHALL MOVE MEN TO TAKE THE WAY OF LIFE NOW, TODAY.

TAKING OUR SUGGESTION, THEN, FROM THIS MESSAGE OF PAUL IN THE PRISON AT ROME TO TIMOTHY IN FAR-OFF EPHESUS—“COME BEFORE WINTER.”

ONCE AGAIN, THEN, I REPEAT THESE WORDS OF THE APOSTLE, “COME BEFORE WINTER” AND AS I PRONOUNCE THEM, COMMON SENSE, EXPERIENCE, CONSCIENCE, SCRIPTURE, THE HOLY SPIRIT, THE SOULS OF JUST MEN MADE PERFECT, AND THE LORD JESUS CHRIST ALL REPEAT WITH ME, “COME BEFORE WINTER!”

COME BEFORE THE HAZE OF INDIAN SUMMER HAS FADED FROM THE FIELDS!

COME BEFORE THE NOVEMBER WIND STRIPS THE LEAVES FROM THE TREES AND SENDS THEM WHIRLING OVER THE FIELDS!

COME BEFORE THE SNOW LIES ON THE UPLANDS AND THE MEADOW BROOK IS TURNED TO ICE! COME BEFORE THE HEART IS COLD!

COME BEFORE DESIRE HAS FAILED!

COME BEFORE LIFE IS OVER AND YOUR PROBATION ENDED, AND YOU STAND BEFORE GOD TO GIVE AN ACCOUNT OF THE USE YOU HAVE MADE OF THE OPPORTUNITIES WHICH IN HIS GRACE HE HAS GRANTED TO YOU!

COME BEFORE WINTER!

CLARENCE MACARTNEY TOOK THOSE THREE SIMPLE WORDS & CHALLENGED HIS LISTENERS NOT TO LET ANOTHER DAY GO BY WITHOUT DOING THE THINGS THEY'VE BEEN PUTTING OFF FOR FAR TOO LONG.

THE REASON CLARENCE MACARTNEY PREACHED THAT SERMON EVERY YEAR FROM 1915 TO 1955 IS BECAUSE IT WAS ALWAYS A MESSAGE THAT NEEDED TO BE HEARD.

THROUGH TWO WORLD WARS AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION, PEOPLE NEEDED TO BE REMINDED NOT TO PUT OFF UNTIL TOMORROW THINGS THAT URGENTLY NEED TO BE DONE TODAY.

WE STILL NEED TO BE REMINDED OF IT.

WHAT DO YOU REALLY NEED TO DO TODAY TO MAKE YOU FEEL, WHEN YOU CLOSE YOUR EYES TONIGHT, THAT YOU ACCOMPLISHED SOMETHING MEANINGFUL?

I'M NOT TALKING ABOUT FOLDING THE LAUNDRY OR RAKING THE LEAVES.

I'M TALKING ABOUT THAT UNWRITTEN LETTER YOU'VE BEEN MEANING TO SEND.

THERE'S A WITHHELD EMBRACE THAT GNAWS AT YOUR SOUL.

THERE'S AN UNSPOKEN WORD OF KINDNESS YOU'VE BEEN MEANING TO UTTER.

THERE'S A CALL TO LOVED ONE YOU KNOW YOU SHOULD MAKE.

THERE'S THE DIVINE CLAIM UPON YOUR LIFE THAT LONGS TO BE ACCEPTED.

MACARTNEY'S MESSAGE IS THAT IF YOU WAIT UNTIL TOMORROW, IT MAY BE TOO LATE.

WHEN MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. DELIVERED HIS "I HAVE A DREAM" SPEECH IN AUGUST 1963 ON THE STEPS OF THE LINCOLN MEMORIAL IN WASHINGTON, D.C, HE SAID, "*WE HAVE ALSO COME TO THIS HALLOWED SPOT TO REMIND AMERICA OF THE FIERCE URGENCY OF NOW.*"

WHAT A GREAT PHRASE THAT IS - "*THE FIERCE URGENCY OF NOW.*"

SOME THINGS SIMPLY CAN'T BE PUT OFF.

THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS IN LIFE SHOULDN'T WAIT UNTIL TOMORROW.

REMEMBER & HEED THE WORDS OF PAUL – THE WORDS OF CLARENCE MACARTNEY – “COME BEFORE WINTER.” AMEN.

*The Reverend Dr. Dennis R. Davenport
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
Evansville, Indiana*