

"A THREE-FOLD JOURNEY"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
July 14, 1996

"A THREE-FOLD JOURNEY"

INTRODUCTION

An old man was sitting on a dock with his fishing pole in hand and his line in the water. A passerby asked him,

"Fishing?" "Nope" replies the old man.
"No....I'm just drowning worms...."

Writer, Robert Fulghum, whose wisdom and humor delights us all, says that he's no fisherman...although....sometimes...he does enjoy it. One summer day he and his nephew and a couple of friends went fishing. One of the friends had told him that this was the lake to fish in because it was always teeming with fish and they'd be sure to catch something.

And so the next day as the sun was coming up they set out for this lake filled with fish. As they arrived, they noticed that fishermen were already out there on the lake so that confirmed what they had been told. They climbed into their boat and claimed a spot and cast their lines.

Fulghum tells us that he felt a tug on his line within a few minutes and he was thrilled. He felt this was going to be a good day, but he was in for a bit of a disappointment as he pulled in his line. The fish was small and as he tossed it back into the water he heard a few snickers. But, he thought to himself, this is only the beginning and he would have plenty of time to catch some big ones. So he cast out into the lake again and once again he felt a tug on his line and he began to reel it in. But when he took his catch out of the water, you'll never believe what he had caught....it was a bat! Somehow he had managed to snag a bat by its wing while making his cast and the poor thing had drowned when he dragged it through the water.

Well....after that...nobody caught anything. Nothing. All day. The trip home in the late afternoon was very quiet as the four of them pondered their bad luck.

DEVELOPMENT

Now the question I put to you is simply this: have you ever had such an experience? Not necessarily fishing, but where you have tried your very best and still came up short? Where nothing was accomplished. Let's face it...we all have and at such times we feel like tossing in the towel and we wonder why we even bothered.

Some people live their entire life like that. They work hard and they try to do what they're supposed to do....but they have nothing to show for their effort. They get discouraged and disheartened and depressed. We've all been there at one time or another in our lives.

Now, in today's Scripture lesson, Paul is telling us to "hang in there" and he even gives us a formula to follow. "Be careful...how you live" he is telling the Ephesians. It really does matter how we live says Paul. Then he goes on to give us some important advice and we can visualize this advice, this counsel as a "three-fold" journey....and it's a journey that can make our sojourn here on earth well worth the trouble. Let's explore this "three-fold" journey together.

JOURNEY OF WISDOM

To me, the first leg of this journey is the journey of wisdom. Paul urges his fellow believers to live....

"NOT...as unwise people, but as wise,
making the most of the time...."

What does it mean then to live wisely. I believe that if we are to live in a world with almost six billion other people, then one good place to begin would be to live with a bit of constraint. We must be willing to place some limits on our behavior.

Remember that charismatic preacher of the Roman Catholic Church, Bishop Fulton J. Sheen. I remember hearing him and seeing him on television on one occasion where he described the difference between a river and a swamp. The river has borders and the swamp, he said, has none. He then went on to say that the lives of some people are a bit like a swamp...stagnant and going nowhere. Others, he pointed out, are like a river...with fresh-flowing waters. And the difference is in that little word that we don't like to think about - the word, DISCIPLINE.

Soren Kiergaard once told a story about a wild duck flying south with other ducks. Below him in a barnyard he noticed some corn a farmer had scattered for his tame ducks. So the duck broke formation and joined the tame ducks down there on the ground in the barnyard. He ate the corn and liked it and decided he would hang around for a few days. This corn was free and life was easy and so he decided to stay around a bit longer. Spring eventually came. One day, high overhead, the duck heard his wild mates calling to him as they flew by on their way back north. Their call reminded him of his "true" life, but when he tried to rejoin them, he could no longer fly. He had settled for the life of ease and comfort. He had given in to a life of collecting corn from off the ground. The point is simply this: we must practice restraint if we are to be able to fly and to soar.

William Barclay, the Bible scholar, once commented on the undisciplined life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He put it this way.

"Coleridge is the supreme tragedy of undiscipline. Never did so great a mind produce so little. He left Cambridge University to join the army. He left the army because he could not rub down a horse. He returned to Oxford and left without a degree. He began a paper called The Watchman which lived for ten issues and then died. It has been said of Coleridge that he lost himself in visions of work to be done, that always remained to be done. He had every poetic gift but one - the gift of sustained and concentrated effort. No one ever reached any eminence" says Barclay, "and no one having reached it ever maintained it, without discipline!"

Christians are to live "wisely" and that includes practicing some restraint. Restraint. Discipline. Use your head. This is the first part of today's "three-fold" journey, but there's more to come. This is only the beginning and I know that many of you are on this first leg. Many use their heads and the world is, indeed, a better place for it...but the second leg of the journey is a little bit more exclusive. Let's see if you're a part of it, too.

SEEK GOD'S WILL

The second leg of the journey involves seeking God's will. Paul is warning us here in this scripture,

"SO, do not be foolish, but understand what the WILL of the Lord is...."

The second part of this journey involves using our hearts. Here, we are not only seeking what makes sense. Here we are putting ourselves in a position to receive a bit of divine guidance. Granted, it's not always easy to discern God's will for our lives. We do not always take the time. And we do not always hear God's voice clearly, nor are we apt to be listening out for it. I think that discovering God's will requires some patience and a deep commitment.

Let me tell you a story about Danny Akin. During the summer weeks before entering college, Danny had opportunity to go to a mission project of his church at an Indian reservation out in Arizona. But unfortunately that same summer his highly regarded baseball team was going on a tour of Latin America. And as much as he wanted to, Danny Akin could not manage to do both. Which one would it be for this 18 year old boy. It was a tough decision and he sweated over it for some time, but finally he decided to go on the mission project, even though just one year before, the baseball trip had been one of his young life's greatest ambitions.

Later on, while in Arizona, Danny attended an evening campfire service. He remembers it well and how he was annoyed with some of the other kids on the trip and how fierce were the bites of the fire ants. He recalls that the pastor who had gone along on this mission trip was preaching to the Indians, he felt however that his words were focussed at him. It came to him as a personal message to join God in His work, in the ministry. And once again, he found himself agonizing and sweating, but eventually he felt called to do the Lord's work and he quietly stepped forward to the campfire, threw in a twig that had represented his former life and prayed for God to use him.

Most people who seek God's will may never end up in a full-time church vocation. There will be some. But some will end up as Christian doctors, Christians teachers, Christian lawyers, or business professionals or construction workers. But God is calling each of us to serve Him with whatever gifts and graces and talents that may be ours. Regardless of what we do with our lives, we are to seek His will in doing it. And as we do, great things can happen.

But we're only two-thirds of our way along this journey. First, we must have wisdom that embraces discipline. Second, we must then seek God's will and then finally we reach the crowning culmination to our life journey. Be filled with the spirit.

FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT

Paul puts it this way:

"Be filled with the Spirit as you sing praises and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves."

Now we are allowing the spirit of God to guide us and to enrich us and to give us some joy and enthusiasm and peace as we walk the "way". As far as I know, this is the only place in the New Testament where the believers are asked to sing for the benefit of other believers. Their singing was to be an encouragement for those who might be struggling with their faith, as well as a way to praise God.

We know from our own experiences what a difference joyful worship can make in our lives. Paul certainly knew the good that can be done through a "spirit-filled" and joyful worship experience. Music and singing do touch us and move us and lift us, and thus he encouraged the people to worship frequently,

"Singing and making melody to the Lord, in your hearts"
(Ephesians 5: 19)

It was a hot and sticky and sweltering Sunday morning and a man by the name of Raymond was sitting through the Sunday service in an un-airconditioned church. It was hot. It was uncomfortable. He later admitted that he was bored by all that was going on and was tempted to get up and quietly leave before it was all over. But just as he was ready to get up and walk out, the choir stood to sing. And then the congregation joined in and before Raymond knew what was happening, he found himself caught up in a strange and totally unexpected way. He was to write about it in years to come.

"The choir, which at best was usually mediocre, began to sing in the most beautiful angelic voices.....and I suddenly felt physically cool, light and emotionally free. An inner voice from somewhere within me whispered, 'Yes, Jesus....I love You!'"

Raymond was not the religious sort at that time and he was quite sure how to explain what he felt, but he still to this day remembers the joy he experienced that morning. And from that unexpected experience Raymond continues to open himself to new spiritual paths and to spiritual growth.

In the book, The Road to Damascus, author Valerie Carnes shares a similar experience. Something drew her to church that Sunday and she found herself in a church service for the first time in quite a few years. As the service began, she began sensing God's presence in a way she had never felt it before. She began to feel "lost", she said...and waves of emotion battered her so strongly that she felt she was drowning.

And by the time the Scriptures were read, Valerie was hiding behind some dark sun glasses. She realized just how far down she was....broken, burned, bruised and that she could not possibly save herself. Valerie was sensing God's presence in a wonderful way....in a way she never thought possible. Oh, she tried to regain her composure as the service went on, but long before the service was over, she was holding her head in her arms and sobbing. Who was it who said "that tears always wash the eyes and then we see so much better?"

CLOSING

Few of us ever experience God's grace in our lives in such a dramatic way...nor is it necessary that everyone have such an experience. We are saved by faith, not by a particular feeling...but the world's wisdom is not enough. And even seeking God's will can be a difficult business for most of us. But there is a hunger deep within us. A hunger for surrender. A hunger to allow the Spirit of God to seep into our lives and give us a new joy, a new peace, a "blessed assurance". "Our hearts" said Augustine long ago, "Our hearts are restless 'til they find their rest in Thee".

So, let me invite you on a journey today - a journey of wisdom, a journey of seeking God's will and a journey of surrender to the glorious spirit of God. I would like to believe - and I do - that just around the bend of each leg of life's journey stands the Savior. He is always there, beckoning us onward and upward. He knocks at the door of our lives with an invitation, but remember the latch is on the inside and it must always be opened from the inside, by him or her whom He invites on this three-fold journey.

PRAYER

Travel with us, Lord, as we make this journey through life. Equip us with the tools to make something significant of this journey.

Help us to be wise in making those decisions that we will live with for a long time. Help us to be disciplined in our habits. And then remind us to seek Your will and then to be filled with the spirit...a spirit of love that others may know to Whom it is we belong. All of this in the name and spirit of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

"A THREE-FOLD JOURNEY"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
July 14, 1996

It's always good to announce a text at the beginning of the sermon said our professor in homiletics in seminary.

"It gives the people something to think about while you're preaching".

So let me take you to Ephesians.....chapter 5, verses 15 - 20.

"Look carefully then...how you walk! Not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.

Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is,

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the SPIRIT...

Addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart....

always and for everything giving THANKS in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ to God the Father"....

"A THREE-FOLD JOURNEY"

INTRODUCTION

An old man was sitting on a dock with his fishing pole in hand and his line in the water. A passerby asked him,

"Fishing?" "Nope" replies the old man.
"No....I'm just drowning worms...."

Writer, Robert Fulghum, whose wisdom and humor delights us all, says that he's no fisherman...although....sometimes...he does enjoy it. One summer day he and his nephew and a couple of friends went fishing. One of the friends had told him that this was the lake to fish in because it was always teeming with fish and they'd be sure to catch something.

And so the next day as the sun was coming up they set out for this lake filled with fish. As they arrived, they noticed that fishermen were already out there on the lake so that confirmed what they had been told. They climbed into their boat and claimed a spot and cast their lines.

Fulghum tells us that he felt a tug on his line within a few minutes and he was thrilled. He felt this was going to be a good day, but he was in for a bit of a disappointment as he pulled in his line. The fish was small and as he tossed it back into the water he heard a few snickers. But, he thought to himself, this is only the beginning and he would have plenty of time to catch some big ones. So he cast out into the lake again and once again he felt a tug on his line and he began to reel it in. But when he took his catch out of the water, you'll never believe what he had caught....it was a bat! Somehow he had managed to snag a bat by its wing while making his cast and the poor thing had drowned when he dragged it through the water.

Well....after that...nobody caught anything. Nothing. All day. The trip home in the late afternoon was very quiet as the four of them pondered their bad luck.

DEVELOPMENT

Now the question I put to you is simply this: have you ever had such an experience? Not necessarily fishing, but where you have tried your very best and still came up short? Where nothing was accomplished. Let's face it...we all have and at such times we feel like tossing in the towel and we wonder why we even bothered.

Some people live their entire life like that. They work hard and they try to do what they're supposed to do....but they have nothing to show for their effort. They get discouraged and disheartened and depressed. We've all been there at one time or another in our lives.

Now, in today's Scripture lesson, Paul is telling us to "hang in there" and he even gives us a formula to follow. "Be careful...how you live" he is telling the Ephesians. It really does matter how we live says Paul. Then he goes on to give us some important advice and we can visualize this advice, this counsel as a "three-fold" journey...and it's a journey that can make our sojourn here on earth well worth the trouble. Let's explore this "three-fold" journey together.

JOURNEY OF WISDOM

To me, the first leg of this journey is the journey of wisdom. Paul urges his fellow believers to live....

"NOT...as unwise people, but as wise,
making the most of the time...."

What does it mean then to live wisely. I believe that if we are to live in a world with almost six billion other people, then one good place to begin would be to live with a bit of constraint. We must be willing to place some limits on our behavior.

Remember that charismatic preacher of the Roman Catholic Church, Bishop Fulton J. Sheen. I remember hearing him and seeing him on television on one occasion where he described the difference between a river and a swamp. The river has borders and the swamp, he said, has none. He then went on to say that the lives of some people are a bit like a swamp...stagnant and going nowhere. Others, he pointed out, are like a river...with fresh-flowing waters. And the difference is in that little word that we don't like to think about - the word, **DISCIPLINE**.

Soren Kiergaard once told a story about a wild duck flying south with other ducks. Below him in a barnyard he noticed some corn a farmer had scattered for his tame ducks. So the duck broke formation and joined the tame ducks down there on the ground in the barnyard. He ate the corn and liked it and decided he would hang around for a few days. This corn was free and life was easy and so he decided to stay around a bit longer. Spring eventually came. One day, high overhead, the duck heard his wild mates calling to him as they flew by on their way back north. Their call reminded him of his "true" life, but when he tried to rejoin them, he could no longer fly. He had settled for the life of ease and comfort. He had given in to a life of collecting corn from off the ground. The point is simply this: we must practice restraint if we are to be able to fly and to soar...to soar with the eagle and not waddle with ducks.

William Barclay, the Bible scholar, once commented on the undisciplined life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He put it this way.

"Coleridge is the supreme tragedy of undiscipline. Never did so great a mind produce so little. He left Cambridge University to join the army. He left the army because he could not rub down a horse. He returned to Oxford and left without a degree. He began a paper called The Watchman which lived for ten issues and then died. It has been said of Coleridge that he lost himself in visions of work to be done, that always remained to be done. He had every poetic gift but one - the gift of sustained and concentrated effort. No one ever reached any eminence" says Barclay, "and no one having reached it ever maintained it, without discipline!"

Christians are to live "wisely" and that includes practicing some restraint. Restraint. Discipline. Use your head. This is the first part of today's "three-fold" journey, but there's more to come. This is only the beginning and I know that many of you are on this first leg. Many use their heads and the world is, indeed, a better place for it...but the second leg of the journey is a little bit more exclusive. Let's see if you're a part of it, too.

SEEK GOD'S WILL

The second leg of the journey involves seeking God's will. Paul is warning us here in this scripture,

"SO, do not be foolish, but understand
what the WILL of the Lord is...."

The second part of this journey involves using our hearts. Here, we are not only seeking what makes sense. Here we are putting ourselves in a position to receive a bit of divine guidance. Granted, it's not always easy to discern God's will for our lives. We do not always take the time. And we do not always hear God's voice clearly, nor are we apt to be listening out for it. I think that discovering God's will requires some patience and a deep commitment.

Let me tell you a story about Danny Akin. During the summer weeks before entering college, Danny had opportunity to go to a mission project of his church at an Indian reservation out in Arizona. But unfortunately that same summer his highly regarded baseball team was going on a tour of Latin America. And as much as he wanted to, Danny Akin could not manage to do both. Which one would it be for this 18 year old boy. It was a tough decision and he sweated over it for some time, but finally he decided to go on the mission project, even though just one year before, the baseball trip had been one of his young life's greatest ambitions.

Later on, while in Arizona, Danny attended an evening campfire service. He remembers it well and how he was annoyed with some of the other kids on the trip and how fierce were the bites of the fire ants. He recalls that the pastor who had gone along on this mission trip was preaching to the Indians, he felt however that his words were focussed at him. It came to him as a personal message to join God in His work, in the ministry. And once again, he found himself agonizing and sweating, but eventually he felt called to do the Lord's work and he quietly stepped forward to the campfire, threw in a twig that had represented his former life and prayed for God to use him.

Most people who seek God's will may never end up in a full-time church vocation. There will be some. But some will end up as Christian doctors, Christians teachers, Christian lawyers, or business professionals or construction workers. But God is calling each of us to serve Him with whatever gifts and graces and talents that may be ours. Regardless of what we do with our lives, we are to seek His will in doing it. And as we do, great things can happen.

But we're only two-thirds of our way along this journey. First, we must have wisdom that embraces discipline. Second, we must then seek God's will and then finally we reach the crowning culmination to our life journey. Be filled with the spirit.

FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT

Paul puts it this way:

"Be filled with the Spirit as you sing praises
and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves."

Now we are allowing the spirit of God to guide us and to enrich us and to give us some joy and enthusiasm and peace as we walk the "way". As far as I know, this is the only place in the New Testament where the believers are asked to sing for the benefit of other believers. Their singing was to be an encouragement for those who might be struggling with their faith, as well as a way to praise God.

We know from our own experiences what a difference joyful worship can make in our lives. Paul certainly knew the good that can be done through a "spirit-filled" and joyful worship experience. Music and singing do touch us and move us and lift us, and thus he encouraged the people to worship frequently,

"Singing and making melody to the Lord, in your hearts"
(Ephesians 5: 19)

It was a hot and sticky and sweltering Sunday morning and a man by the name of Raymond was sitting through the Sunday service in an un-airconditioned church. It was hot. It was uncomfortable. He later admitted that he was bored by all that was going on and was tempted to get up and quietly leave before it was all over. But just as he was ready to get up and walk out, the choir stood to sing. And then the congregation joined in and before Raymond knew what was happening, he found himself caught up in a strange and totally unexpected way. He was to write about it in years to come.

"The choir, which at best was usually mediocre, began to sing in the most beautiful angelic voices.....and I suddenly felt physically cool, light and emotionally free. An inner voice from somewhere within me whispered, 'Yes, Jesus....I love You!'"

Raymond was not the religious sort at that time and he was not sure how to explain what he felt, but he still to this day remembers the joy he experienced that morning. And from that unexpected experience Raymond continues to open himself to new spiritual paths and to spiritual growth.

In the book, The Road to Damascus, author Valerie Carnes shares a similar experience. Something drew her to church that Sunday and she found herself in a church service for the first time in quite a few years. As the service began, she began sensing God's presence in a way she had never felt it before. She began to feel "lost", she said...and waves of emotion battered her so strongly that she felt she was drowning.

And by the time the Scriptures were read, Valerie was hiding behind some dark sun glasses. She realized just how far down she was....broken, burned, bruised and that she could not possibly save herself. Valerie was sensing God's presence in a wonderful way....in a way she never thought possible. Oh, she tried to regain her composure as the service went on, but long before the service was over, she was holding her head in her arms and sobbing. Who was it who said "that tears always wash the eyes and then we see so much better?"

CLOSING

Few of us ever experience God's grace in our lives in such a dramatic way...nor is it necessary that everyone have such an experience. We are saved by faith, not by a particular feeling...but the world's wisdom is not enough. And even seeking God's will can be a difficult business for most of us. But there is a hunger deep within us. A hunger for surrender. A hunger to allow the Spirit of God to seep into our lives and give us a new joy, a new peace, a "blessed assurance". "Our hearts" said Augustine long ago, "Our hearts are restless 'til they find their rest in Thee".

So, let me invite you on a journey today - a journey of wisdom, a journey of seeking God's will and a journey of surrender to the glorious spirit of God. I would like to believe - and I do - that just around the bend of each leg of life's journey stands the Savior. He is always there, beckoning us onward and upward. He knocks at the door of our lives with an invitation, but remember the latch is on the inside and it must always be opened from the inside, by him or her whom He invites on this three-fold journey.

PRAYER Travel with us, Lord, as we make this journey through life.
Equip us with the tools to make something significant of this
PRAYER journey.

Help us to be wise in making those decisions that we will live with for a long time. Help us to be disciplined in our habits. And then remind us to seek Your will and then to be filled with the spirit...a spirit of love that others may know to Whom it is we belong. All of this in the name and spirit of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.