

"BEYOND OUR CONTROL"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th. Street
New York, New York 10028
July 22, 1990

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INTRODUCTION

No matter what happened to a certain gold miner he always described it as pure luck. It was a particularly bitter winter. He was nearly freezing to death, but he kept digging for gold in the granite-like ground. Finally, as the earth thawed in the Spring and he was down to his last meager ration of food, he broke through the hard crust and dug and dug until at last he hit a box. Inside the box was a carton of canned food left behind by some earlier miner. "Boy, am I ever lucky" he said, "It could have been gold".

We like to describe ourselves as self-made men and women. We like to take credit for our accomplishments. We like to be rewarded for our sacrifices and hard work. It's difficult for us to admit that there are some things in life over which we have no control. This is the theme of today's sermon.

DEVELOPMENT

Some of these things are very basic. We could not choose our parents. We could not choose the country in which we were born. We could not choose the color of our skin or our native language. We could not choose the pre-natal care we had or the quality of our teachers along the way.

Some of us "self-made people" started life with an enormous advantage. Now that we are adults, though, we can choose. We can set goals, chart courses, work hard, persevere. Still, there is a margin of life that does not yield to our control.

We speak of being in the "right place at the right time", or perhaps the "wrong place at the wrong time".

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A more tragic example.

The teenage son is sailing down the street on his sixteenth birthday. This is the first time he has driven on his own. He takes his eye off the road for just a moment to pop a cassette in the dash. At that moment a truck backs into the street in his lane. Instant tragedy.

No matter how disciplined or intelligent or hard-working we are there are some things in life beyond our control.

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to control the uncontrollable are ludicrous. And this you see is where superstition creeps into life. In order to control the uncontrollable we resort to charms, and rituals and signs and curses...whatever.

Athletes are notoriously superstitious. In the first game of a double-header some years back, I recall that former baseball star Minnie Minoso went hitless in five times at bat. Between games he took a shower in his uniform, claiming he was washing away the evil spirits. Everybody laughed, but in the second game Minnie got three hits. After the game, eight players took showers with their uniforms on. I thought of that incident earlier this week when one of the White Sox players forgot where he was as he stood on second base and started to take his baseball pants off. No telling what might have happened if he had hit a home run next time at bat.

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Meanwhile a short distance away, other team members were trying to rescue a little girl who had fallen into a manhole in the street and was lodged near some high voltage lines. Their greatest fear was that it would rain, which would expose the little girl to a greater risk of electrocution. Can you see what a bind God would be in if He attempted to answer all our prayers to control the uncontrollable?

AREAS OF OUR LIVES BEYOND OUR CONTROL AND THIS IS GOOD

There are areas of our lives beyond our control and this is good. With our finite minds, we could never order a perfect world.

There are many ancient fables illustrating this truth. There is an old Hebrew legend that tells of a man journeying on a mule through a wild and desolate area. His only companion was a rooster whose shrill crowing at sunrise awoke him to his devotions. At nightfall he came to a small town looking for shelter, but the inhabitants turned him away. Outside the village he found a cave to sleep in. He lit his lamp before retiring, but a gust of wind blew out the light.

During the night a wolf killed his rooster and a lion devoured his mule. Early in the morning he went back to the town to see if he could buy some food. To his surprise he found no one alive. A band of robbers had plundered the settlement while he slept and slain all the inhabitants. Said the man to himself,

"Now I understand my troubles. If the townspeople had received me, I would have joined them in death. If my rooster and mule had not been killed, their noise and the light from my lamp would have revealed my hiding place. God has been good to me."

At the end of the 16th century a fisherman was standing on a cliff on one of the Orkney islands north of Scotland. He watched a storm batter his cottage, his boat and his fishing tackle. The man was a Christian, but his faith sagged as he watched the harsh destruction of all he owned.

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PRAYER

"And now grant each of us, O God, the serenity to accept the things we cannot change. The courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

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INTRODUCTION

No matter what happened to a certain gold miner he always described it as pure luck. It was a particularly bitter winter. He was nearly freezing to death, but he kept digging for gold in the granite-like ground. Finally, as the earth thawed in the Spring and he was down to his last meager ration of food, he broke through the hard crust and dug and dug until at last he hit a box. Inside the box was a carton of canned food left behind by some earlier miner. "Boy, am I ever lucky" he said, "It could have been gold".

We like to describe ourselves as self-made men and women. We like to take credit for our accomplishments. We like to be rewarded for our sacrifices and hard work. It's difficult for us to admit that there are some things in life over which we have no control. This is the theme of today's sermon.

DEVELOPMENT Some of these things are very basic. We could not choose our parents. We could not choose the country in which we were born. We could not choose the color of our skin or our native language. We could not choose the pre-natal care we had or the quality of our teachers along the way.

Some of us "self-made people" started life with an enormous advantage. Now that we are adults, though, we can choose. We can set goals, chart courses, work hard, persevere. Still, there is a margin of life that does not yield to our control.

We speak of being in the "right place at the right time", or perhaps the "wrong place at the wrong time".

A couple happened to be sitting in a restaurant here in the city. They overheard two Wall Street types discussing a certain stock that was about to sky-rocket in value. The couple rushed to the bank, withdrew their savings and invested in the stock. It was a risky venture. They could have lost everything. They were what we call "lucky". The stock tripled in value in a relatively short time and they made a killing.

A baseball player, playing on natural turf, is set to field a routine ground ball. The ball strikes a small clod of clay and skips off the player's glove. A run scores. Through no fault of the player, the game is lost. He's the goat in the next day's paper. Wrong place. Wrong time.

SOME THING IN LIFE BEYOND OUR CONTROL

things in life beyond our control.

Yes, put down as the first point in today's message that there are some

A daughter has an outdoor wedding planned. Mom and dad are hoping for sunshine. The darkest clouds of the entire summer roll in. Or baby smiles that first big smile. Parents have been waiting poised weeks with the camera. The corners of the mouth turn up, grab the camera, push the button, "poof" - the bulb in the flash fails at precisely that wonderful moment.

A more tragic example.

The teenage son is sailing down the street on his sixteenth birthday. This is the first time he has driven on his own. He takes his eye off the road for just a moment to pop a cassette in the dash. At that moment a truck backs into the street in his lane. Instant tragedy.

No matter how disciplined or intelligent or hard-working we are there are some things in life beyond our control.

SOME OF OUR EFFORTS TO CONTROL THE UNCONTROLLABLE ARE LUDICROUS

Some of
our efforts

to control the uncontrollable are ludicrous. And this you see is where superstition creeps into life. In order to control the uncontrollable we resort to charms, and rituals and signs and curses...whatever.

Athletes are notoriously superstitious. In the first game of a double-header some years back, I recall that former baseball star Minnie Minoso went hitless in five times at bat. Between games he took a shower in his uniform, claiming he was washing away the evil spirits. Everybody laughed, but in the second game Minnie got three hits. After the game, eight players took showers with their uniforms on. I thought of that incident earlier this week when one of the White Sox players forgot where he was as he stood on second base and started to take his baseball pants off. No telling what might have happened if he had hit a home run next time at bat.

The night before the final round of the 1935 Master, a friend gave golfer Gene Sarazen a ring. He told Gene the ring had belonged to Benito Juarez, the 19th century Mexican statesman. Carry it for good luck, he said.

Three strokes back with four holes left on Sunday, Sarazen took the ring out of his pocket. He gave it a rub for good luck before playing his second shot to the 15th green. Then he proceeded to put the ball into the hole with a 4-wood for his famous double eagle. His friend later confessed that the ring never belonged to Benito Juarez at all. It was just something he picked up from a street vendor.

The pervasiveness of superstition to control human destiny was brought home to us as a people quite starkly when it was revealed that an astrologer had influenced former President Reagan's schedule.

It's interesting that in this age of science, belief in superstition is growing. According to a 1978 Gallup Poll 19 percent of American teenagers believed in witches, and 28 percent in astrology. By 1988, 29 percent of American teenagers polled by the Gallup organization believed in witchcraft and 58 percent of those teens polled believed in astrology.

Sometimes, superstition even creeps over into Christian faith. Respected scholar and teacher, Dr. R. C. Sproul, refers to a practice which he calls "Lucky dipping". Here's how he defines it:

"Lucky dipping refers to the method of Bible study in which a person prays for divine guidance and then lets the Bible fall open to wherever it happens to open. Then, with eyes shut the person 'dips' his finger to the page and gets his answer from God wherever the finger lands on the page...

"This is not a sound way to use the Bible" comments Sproul. "I don't think ...the Holy Ghost had this in mind when the words were penned."

Most of us remember the old story about the man who lucky dipped the Scriptures .:his finger" fell on the verse, "And Judas went and hanged himself..." Trying again his finger fell on another verse, "Go thou and do likewise..."

Of course, every one of us has tried to use prayer to control the uncontrollable at some time or another. Have you ever thought what a bind it would put God in if He tried to answer all our prayers?

There was an interesting scene on the television program, HELP not too long ago. A truck carrying toxic radioactive material had crashed on a bridge. During the attempt to recover it, it began to rain. "Thank God" said one of the team members. The rain would help hinder the possible spread of contamination.

Meanwhile a short distance away, other team members were trying to rescue a little girl who had fallen into a manhole in the street and was lodged near some high voltage lines. Their greatest fear was that it would rain, which would expose the little girl to a greater risk of electrocution. Can you see what a bind God would be in if He attempted to answer all our prayers to control the uncontrollable?

AREAS OF OUR LIVES BEYOND OUR CONTROL AND THIS IS GOOD

There are areas of our lives be-

yond our control and this is good. With our finite minds, we could never order a perfect world.

There are many ancient fables illustrating this truth. There is an old Hebrew legend that tells of a man journeying on a mule through a wild and desolate area. His only companion was a rooster whose shrill crowing at sunrise awoke him to his devotions. At nightfall he came to a small town looking for shelter, but the inhabitants turned him away. Outside the village he found a cave to sleep in. He lit his lamp before retiring, but a gust of wind blew out the light.

During the night a wolf killed his rooster and a lion devoured his mule. Early in the morning he went back to the town to see if he could buy some food. To his surprise he found no one alive. A band of robbers had plundered the settlement while he slept and slain all the inhabitants. Said the man to himself,

"Now I understand my troubles. If the townspeople had received me, I would have joined them in death. If my rooster and mule had not been killed, their noise and the light from my lamp would have revealed my hiding place. God has been good to me."

At the end of the 16th century a fisherman was standing on a cliff on one of the Orkney islands north of Scotland. He watched a storm batter his cottage, his boat and his fishing tackle. The man was a Christian, but his faith sagged as he watched the harsh destruction of all he owned.

Little did he know that this very same storm had sunk part of the Spanish Armada that was headed toward England bent on conquest. This storm may very well have spared England the terror of a Spanish Inquisition. It may also have permitted the flowering of the Elizabethan Age - that golden era that gave us such notables as Shakespeare, John Donne, Francis Bacon, Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe and John Webster. Of course, the climaxing and culminating literary achievement in 1611 was the King James Version of the Bible.

There are areas of our life beyond our control and this is good. We simply cannot ever hope to have enough knowledge or enough wisdom to perfectly determine our lives. As someone has wisely said,

"If God would concede me His omnipotence for twenty-four hours, you would see how many changes I would make in the world. But if He gave me His wisdom, too, I would leave things as they are."

Thomas Carlyle once wrote:

"Does the minnow understand the ocean tides and periodic currents, the trade winds and monsoons and moon's eclipses, by all of which the condition of its little creek is regulated, and may, from time to time, be quite upset and reversed? Such a minnow is man; his creek, this planet earth; his ocean, the immeasurable all; his monsoons and periodic currents, the mysterious course of providence."

FAITH IN A WISE AND LOVING GOD

a wise and loving God.

This is where the Christian relies not on luck or upon superstition, but upon faith in

St. Paul writes those familiar words in Romans, Chapter 8 and verse 28,

"We know that in everything God works for good with those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose".

This is the Gospel. It doesn't fit our rationalistic view of our universe. It makes a mockery of our dependence upon charms and astrologers, but it is the Gospel. In everything, God is working for good with those who love Him.

How can we get our minds around this great truth? A colleague once explained it in terms any of us can understand. He said,

"My wife can make better chocolate cake than anyone I know. So one day I thought I'd go into the kitchen and see what wonderful ingredients she used. First, she sifted some flour - this didn't appeal to me at all, for it was dry and unappetizing. Next she added a cup of sour milk. Now the batter looked very distasteful. Then, to make matters worse, she put in a raw egg. By this time I was not too sure whether I liked chocolate cake or not. I left just as she was popping it into the oven. Much to my surprise,

that evening her masterpiece was as delicious as any she ever baked! This is the spiritual lesson I learned:

Often in life we encounter 'Dry stretches' which are tasteless and uninviting like the flour. We also meet with 'sour' experiences like the milk, and even a few 'raw deals' like the egg; but after we have gone through the oven of affliction, praise God, all will become a sweet and flavorful blessing over there!"

This is as far as we can go. There is much in life beyond our control and beyond our comprehension, but not beyond God's. He is able to make all things work for good for those who love Him.

"And now grant each of us, O God, the serenity to accept the things we cannot change. The courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

This we now ask in the name and spirit of Christ, our Lord.
Amen.