

"CROSSING THE DESERT"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
May 16, 1993

INTRODUCTION

There's a beautiful 14th century cathedral in a small, picturesque town in Italy that has for many, many years inspired countless numbers of people. It's the tallest building in the town and it can be seen from many miles away. Truly, it's a monument of faith to the people of that town of the time in which it was built. Tourists still come to visit this old cathedral and marvel at its art and its treasures.

Now you might think that such a beautiful cathedral would be filled with many worshippers on a Sunday and you might think that it would be wonderful to be a part of such a magnificent church, but the truth is that when a new pastor arrived in that town he was sadly faced with an empty building. Very few people in that little town ever went out to worship in this grand old cathedral.

DEVELOPMENT

The cathedral was an artistic gem but spiritually it was dead. Thus the pastor made a rather bold decision. He decided to move the congregation out of that magnificent edifice and together he and some of the towns people built a simple cinderblock church a short distance from the 14th century cathedral. The only word to describe this new church is the word "ugly". It's no match for the beautiful 14th century structure. Yet, on a Sunday it is packed with people - young and old. The new church is thriving - a worshipping community with a contagious and lively faith. The pastor offered this word of explanation,

"The beautiful fourteenth century church is not theirs. It belongs to another era!"

For faith to make any difference in our lives it must first be our own! Faith isn't something we can borrow from our neighbors or our parents or our fellow churchgoers, or anyone else. We must claim faith as our own if it is to make any difference in our lives....which leads me back to our scripture lesson.

THE APOSTLE PAUL

The Apostle Paul was completing his missionary journey when he stopped off in Athens. Now remember that Athens at this time was the center of western civilization, the home of the great philosophers and the intellectual center of the world. And being the intellectual giant that Paul was, oh how he must have enjoyed roaming the streets of Athens. As he walked, he was apparently impressed by the number of statues to the various Greek gods for he later makes reference to this.

There came that day when Paul felt moved to address the Athenians from the famous Areopagus. Athenians loved to hear new ideas and new speakers. And some of them came every day to this spot to listen to various viewpoints and philosophies. Chances are that some of them had already heard Paul speak in the synagogue, others in the marketplace. Paul was a novelty and they were intrigued with his strange ideas. The Athenians with their inquiring minds wanted to hear something new.

So picture Paul standing in the place where the famous Greek philosophers had once stood to address the crowds. He began by telling the people how much he enjoyed walking through their city. He even complimented them with the word,

"I see how extremely religious you are in every way!"

It's important for us to see that Paul didn't condemn the Athenians for worshipping idols. He was smarter than that. He knew from experience that "you win more people with honey than you do with vinegar"...as the old saying goes. You and I need to remember that. You can't come in blasting people.. they'll turn you off before you even make it to first base. Paul was a smart cookie.

I'm reminded of a story about Voltaire, the French philosopher who was visiting London in 1727...just about the time the Wesley brothers were finishing their studies at Oxford. Relations between England and France were somewhat strained and walking one of the streets of London, Voltaire found himself facing an angry crowd of Englishmen. "Hang the Frenchman" they began to scream. But Voltaire quickly took advantage of the situation. He took a step or two backward and called out to the angry crowd,

"Englishmen! Englishmen! You want to KILL me because I am a Frenchman? Have I not been punished enough already in not being an Englishman?"

The crowd applauded. They even went so far as to see that Voltaire got back to France safely. Well, Paul was very cool and used something of that same kind of strategy with the people of Athens.

START WHERE PEOPLE ARE

We have to start where people are when it comes to "winning" them over to Christ. You can't come in and blast them and say "you're all wrong"...

I love that Peanuts comic strip where Linus is listening attentively to his little sister as she tells him about her potential as an evangelist. She says to Linus,

"I would have made a good evangelist. Do you know that kid who sits behind me at school? I convinced him that my religion is better than his religion". "How did you do that?" Linus asks. "And Lucy replies, "I hit him hard with my lunch box...."

The Apostle Paul begins with a compliment - not a condemnation. He began his message where they were. He first acknowledged their many statues to the gods. This indicated their yearning for God and he even went so far as to compliment them on that yearning. He told them that while walking around their city, he had seen an altar with the inscription, "To an UNKNOWN God". You'll remember that the Greeks believed in many Gods. They had a god for just about every occasion. And just to cover all the bases, they built this altar to "an unknown God"...just in case they had left any god out. And Paul says to them in a very friendly and non-coercive way, "I'd like to tell you more about this unknown God".

There's a television ad that comes to mind that shows a conversation taking place between a spokesperson for Mercedes-Benz and an interviewer. They're talking about the design of the Mercedes and the spokesperson for Mercedes-Benz describes a safety feature - a crash absorbing mechanism. The interviewer mentions that other models have almost the same feature to which the Mercedes-Bens spokeman indicates that the were first developed by his company and then graciously adds this word,

"There are some things that are just TOO IMPORTANT not to share."

I like that line. This was Paul's motivation in sharing his witness with the Athenians. He, above all people, knew the tragedy of an unfulfilling faith. In Christ, he had found something....something life-transforming, something infinitely better, something real and deeply satisfying and he simply wanted to share it. And standing there among these inquiring Greeks, Paul viewed his situation as an opportunity to tell people about the One, true God - the God who had created "the heavens and the earth"...who had broken into this very life of ours in the person of Christ.

SHARING HIS FAITH WAS NATURAL FOR HIM

For Paul, sharing his faith was the most natural thing in the world. For many of us, it is not. We get all "tongue-tied" when it comes to sharing our faith naturally with others. One wonders why. At times we act as if it were the hardest thing in the world to do.

Dorothy Pryse writing in the September - October issue of the Upper Room told of how she was listening to a Christian radio station driving to the grocery store one morning. A person was talking about kindness and lifted up this question,

"I wonder how many of you are listening to me on your car radio and thinking of how you can be kind while driving your car."

Dorothy began to think about what he was saying. A few blocks away, she saw a woman waiting in her car to come out of her driveway. Traffic was on the heavy side and Dorothy sensed the woman was having a hard time getting out. She slowed down to let her out. The woman smiled and waved and whispered "thanks". When she got to the grocery store she saw a parking space and as she started to pull in, so, too, did another car coming from another direction start to pull in. Dorothy backed out and found another parking spot.

As they both got out of their cars, the driver of the other car said to her,

"I can't believe what you just did. Anyone else would have made me back out....thank you."

With that Dorothy with a smile on her face said what she had just heard on the radio about showing kindness. The two women began talking. Before long Dorothy discovered that the other woman had just moved into the area and didn't know anyone and was looking around for a church. Dorothy says,

"I invited her to come to our church and a strong friendship has blossomed from our chance meeting in the parking lot and a small act of kindness."

A chance meeting changed someone's life. A friendship was formed. It happened because Dorothy Pryse was seeking to live out her Christian faith. Who was it who said,

"Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words"

Paul said to the people of Athens, "God is not far from each one of us", and then he went on and quoted from a famous Greek poet that most of the people were familiar with, "For 'in Him we live and move and have our being'". The God who was invisible has become visible. The God they were searching for has revealed Himself. ~~to us~~ in Christ Jesus.

AN INVITATION FOLLOWED

Paul then proceeded to close this out by offering an invitation. He told them how God had raised Jesus from the dead. Here is where "the sheep are separated from the goats". Some scoffed at the idea of the resurrection of the dead. Others said, "We will hear you again about this..." But there were some who "joined him and became believers."

For some who gathered around, Paul's message was nothing more than an afternoon's entertainment...nothing more than mental gymnastics. They would not be changed by the Gospel message. For others, it was the beginning of a new life.

Bruce Larsen in the book, The Presence, tells how one of his sons crossed the Sahara Desert a few years ago. Seems he made an interesting discovery. He said you could divide all the travelers making the journey across the desert into ~~two~~ different groups. First, there were those who were intent on getting across the desert at any cost. Then there was the group whose top priority was to save their vehicle. He said he ran into two Swiss students whose Land Rover developed some small problem and the problem was potentially a serious one and so they started back to Switzerland at once.

But then on the other hand, he tells of traveling part of the time with a group of Germans. They went so far as to abandon their fairly new Peugeot automobile out there in the desert. They continued on their way, hitching a ride on a truck. To them the most important thing was getting across the desert. The vehicle was simply the means of getting there. The real difference was in terms of Goals. Some were determined to get across. The others he went on to suggest were more interested in protecting what they had.

So it was with those who listened to St. Paul that day long ago in Athens. Some heard and responded positively. Others just walked away, wanting to protect what they had.

OUR TURN

And now it's our turn. Shall we follow Christ, even to the point of being a living witness to His word, or are we more inclined to want to want to hold on to what we have, more content in protecting what is ours.

George Gallup in a book entitled, The Saints Among Us, introduces us to forty year old Laura Cooper who works in a sales office in the mid-west. She works in the same office as her brother-in-law, John. More than anyone else, Laura, says, it was John who was instrumental in leading her to Christ. What made a difference in Laura's life was not eloquent and persuasive speeches. Her transformation from skeptic to believer had mostly to do with how John lives.

A turning point came one morning when John took one of her calls. It was someone Laura was trying to avoid. "Tell him, I'm not here" she whispered to John. John took the call but later on felt badly in lying about it. He talked with Laura about it. He told her that he had even confessed to the Lord his sin of lying and that he could not longer lie for her. "Please don't ask me" he said.

Laura said that,

"As we talked about it, I came to a new understanding about his beliefs and his convictions about sin, and wrong-doing, and lying. It made a big difference."

And it wasn't his "preaching" to her that moved her, but rather his integrity. Laura watched how John treated other people and she said,

"I've never seen a man more devoted to his wife than John. I knew instinctively that the Lord was in their life...and that was the reason for their special relationship".

From that moment on Laura began to change things in her life; she even began attending church. Yes, her search was over. "Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary use words". I think that nothing is more appealing than a life authentically touched by the hand of the Master. Some of the Athenians that day long ago in Athens saw that in Paul and they responded to his invitation.

One can't but wonder...do they see that in you? In me? Crossing the desert, or just protecting our vehicle. Only we can decide for as the poet has put it,

"To every man there openeth a Way and Ways and a Way.
And the high soul climbs the high way,
And the low soul gropes the low,
And in between on the misty flats the rest drift 'to
and fro'.

But to every man there openeth a High Way and a Low,
And every man decideth the way his soul shall go."

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your presence and Your nearness in these quiet moments, O God. Confirm within us the feelings and the decisions that may be at work in our hearts. Wrestle with each of us in those hidden corners of our lives...where shadows exist... and darkness and despair and discouragement have found a home.

Visit our sick with the quiet assurance of Your care and encircle the bereaved and lonely with Your warming, healing presence. Point out markers along the trail.. those who have lost their way.

And douse with the cold waters of common sense any who might this very day be on the verge of some destructive action of unhealthy decision.

For the race is short, ~~as God~~.. even at its longest and we would run it well and always to Your glory. Amen

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, May 16, 1993

GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We greet the visitors in the congregation this morning...delighted you're here and I hope we'll have the opportunity to greet you in a more personal way....be free in the sharing of your name...fill out a visitor card or sign one of the Guest Books....
- B. Come and worship with us...come, work with us, too....we've been doing the Lord's work at this busy corner of His Kingdom since 1837. We minister here in the name of CHRIST and it is in His loving spirit.....
- C. Members: be sure to wear your name tags at the coffee hour. Go out of your way to make some new friends....

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Be sure to review the parish concerns offered in both the monthly news sheet and the weekly bulletin. New friends are always welcome at both the "HOUNDS" and the ALDERSGATE CLASS... spiritual growth and study opportunities. And remember the Adult Bible Class of Sunday mornings...
- B. BAKE SALE III...a part of today's coffee hour. Helps to undergird the travel expenses in connection with our June 19th picnic. So be sure to make a purchase and nudge along a good effort....
- C. Remember that today a trip to the SHARK BAR...a popular restaurant on Amsterdam and West 74th is planned by Adult Fellowship members. Michael Vann, of our congregation, operates the restaurant....gospel music on a Sunday afternoon....
- D. Don't forget to respond to the special appeal for the Health Care Agencies of our congregation if you haven't already. We still need a couple of hundred dollars to make our goal...envelopes will remain there through May.
- E. Outreach concerns: volunteers needed for the Saturday Feeding program. Be in touch with: Also remember TUNA and BEANS needed for the YCP.

OFFERING

- A. Jesus said,

"It is more blessed to give than it is to receive"....in this spirit let us worship God with our morning offering.

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