

"THE STORY OF DEMAS"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
September 27, 1987

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TEXT: "Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica"

(II Timothy 4: 9, 10)

INTRODUCTION

Let me tell you about Demas this morning. He was a travelling companion of the Apostle Paul - at least for a while. We have three references in the writings of Paul to this man, Demas, who apparently made a promising beginning, but a poor ending and who in turn has become something of a Biblical symbol of the person who never finished what he began.

PAUL'S REFERENCES

Let's take a look at Paul's references to his partner, Demas. Those references come toward the end of his ministry, indicating that Demas was with Paul in Rome. It sounds exciting. In one reference, Paul couples the name of Demas with that of Luke and John Mark and gratefully refers to the three of them as "my fellow workers". In the next reference, Paul says, "Luke, the beloved physician and Demas greet you". And the final reference to Demas has sad overtones for near the end of his letter to young Timothy, Paul writes this line that I touched on a moment ago, "For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica".

So far as we know, there is no more information available to us regarding Demas than these three brief references. We simply know that this man was one of Paul's lieutenants in Rome who for a time shared the Apostle's work there, but at length deserted the cause and went back to Thessalonica.

IMAGINATION GOES TO WORK

From there one, the imagination goes to work and fills in the outline. Since Demas went back to Thessalonica, are we free to assume that this was the city from whence he came? Had he been there among the converts in that Macedonian city when Paul first came preaching the Gospel? Had we come forward in the altar call following Paul's message? Had he been one of the founders of the little church there, perhaps even opening up his home for the meetings of those who had been won to Christ? Did he share his time and talent to its growing strength? And once, when Paul came back to revisit Thessalonica and conduct a Charge Conference, did Demas take Paul to one side and say,

"Look, Paul...I've been giving this some thought...and if you can use me, I'd like to sign up and be a part of your team that travels...I can do this...I can do that...I'm available".

Anyway, somewhere along the line Paul met Demas, sized him up as a man who could be of help and welcomed him to partnership. And we can imagine how proud the members of old First Church, Thessalonica must have been when their fellow member marched off in company with Paul...and there were speeches and flowers and perhaps a small purse at the coffee hour in his honor as he departed.

And for a time, one supposes, all went well and Demas thrilled to his new life - the new sights and the adventures. How he must have enjoyed seeing Rome, center of the world of that day. Then, too, there was a certain fascination about this man, Paul. Why, he always seemed to emerge triumphant over his troubles. There was a certain amount of prestige, too, about presenting your credentials as a member of Paul's company. But the day came when the newness wore off. Paul was in prison and the power of Nero loomed large. It was more and more dangerous to be a

Christian. And the faith really seemed to be so vague. The old town and these old ties tugged at his heart. And so one wonders, did Demas dit down one afternoon there in Rome and pen Paul a note saying:

"Dear Paul...I hate to do this to you. You've been a good friend. But I just don't think this is where I belong. It just isn't for me. By the time you read this, I'll be on my way back to Thessalonica. Thanks for everything. Good look to you in your work. You made a difference."

Now of course, we don't know the details. We only have Paul's final, sad reference to Demas, "And Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me". But even from such meager information, we are reminded once more that the Bible is not an unrealistic version of human nature, not the result of collusion which omits that which is unfavorable, but rather the result of honest reporting which pictures people as they were - and, we might add, as they are!

DEMAS / NO STRANGER Our encounter with Demas here this morning first causes us to look outward and to admit that Demas is no stranger to our list of acquaintances. One of the darkest and most difficult moments in life occurs, I believe, when we realize that someone in whom we have placed trust and confidence and faith has either fooled us or failed us.

It should be of some little comfort to us in such a dark moment to remember that any adventure in faith in people will almost inevitably result in disappointment. So Paul had his Demas and Jesus...Jesus had his Judas. Here was the peerless pioneer of our faith and here was His tall first lieutenant - both of them surrounding themselves with men who grew into the strongest kind of discipleship, but each of them choosing at least one person who is remembered today as a failure, a disappointment.

So, remember that, you who are in business, the next time you are pondering the puzzling failure of some one you had chosen for a position of trust. Remember that, those of us in the Church, the next time we are disappointed in a person in whom we had confidence as a leader or holder of a position of trust. Remember that - in our friendships and even in our homes - when a recipient of love does not measure up in his or her response. Indeed, Jesus and Paul knew something about such risks of failure and disappointment.

In all of us, we need not reject or revise anything that we have previously said about the power of persistent love. Love still abides as the greatest and the strongest force in the world. But it does need to be added that even the love of God is not coercive. God has given to each of us the dignity of freedom of choice and God Himself respect that dignity. This is the fact which is unforgettably etched into Holman Hunt's painting, "The Light of the World"...which hangs there in St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Jesus stands knocking at the door, but there is no latch on the outside. The door can be opened only from the inside. So Jesus could not coerce Judas, even by the power of so great a love - nor Paul, Demas.

Anyone who follows the Master's injunction to "love one another" may well meet up with Demas somewhere along the line, even as did Paul. For we read,

"Demas, in love with this present world has deserted me."

FAILED TO FINISH

But now the more difficult lesson from our encounter with Demas is to look inward and to ask ourselves whether we're a distant relative of this first century man who lacked the ability to finish what he started. I suspect that all of us know something of the enthusiasm of splendid beginnings and then the doldrums of an uninspired continuance when we are sorely tempted to let down and give up and move out.

Years ago I came across that brief line in the Reader's Digest offered by a mother whose son earned his spending money by mowing lawns. As one who use to mow lawns growing up, I clipped it. She said that one Saturday morning her son was unusually slow in leaving the house and when she asked him about the delay, he replied:

"Oh, mom...I'm just waiting 'till people get started. You see, mom, I get most of my jobs from people who give up half way through".

And that contribution is certainly in keeping with the spirit of the oft-quoted comment of the Duke of Wellington when someone asked him the secret of the English victory over the French forces at Waterloo. He said, "We were brave five minutes longer". And who was it who said, "The rock bottom thing about life is to keep on going when we don't want to keep on going, and to be willing to give up what isn't really necessary".

Most of us know how easy it is to stop halfway through and how difficult it is to find that added perseverance that provides the margin of victory. As someone has pointed out, "It's easier to build a reputation than it is to maintain it".

You - in school. Are you Demas? Demas abounds in good intentions, does well on his achievement tests, becomes marked as a promising youth. But you know how it is - the homework becomes sandwiched in between telephone and TV, the outside activities pile up, the exams come along, the marking periods begin and end, the record is recorded, the years pass and people shake their heads and say, "I wonder whatever happened to Demas? Remember him? He had such promise".

You - who are busy - whether in vocation or some volunteer work. Are you Demas? You start a job to the tune of congratulations and good wishes. You take on a responsibility in your community or church. After a few weeks at it, you run into hardships and headaches, problems and criticism and you're ready to "chuck it"...throw it over, pass it on to someone else. Do not misunderstand me. I'm not pleading for that "blind endurance" which glues a person to a position for ever, but by and large, as a nation of workers, we're more inclined to be tentative than tenacious. And when things get dull or rough and the nice weather beckons, we pack up and pull out rather than pushing on.

There's something of Demas in all of us. So be careful. Watch out for the subtle temptations of this city..and not so subtle at times... they can do a job on you and pull you away from those spiritual values that you had in great abundance the day you arrived here.

There isn't much we can do for Demas, but there is something we can do for ourselves, something we can do to strengthen our lives, our loyalties and guard ourselves against the temptation to step away. I remember a poem from other days that has been running through my mind as I pulled these thoughts for a sermon dealing with Demas and his life story. Here it is:

"Across the fields of yesterday, he sometimes comes to me,
A little lad just back from play - the lad I use to be.

And yet he smiles so wistfully, once he has crept within,
I wonder if he hopes to see the man I might have been."

I wonder how Demas would have felt had he repeated this poem to himself several years after his desertion of Paul and the Kingdom enterprise. I'm even more concerned about the effect it has on us today as we think of the tasks that involve our lives in the work of the Kingdom.

ONE THING I KNOW

One or two things I know. One is that this city takes its toll on all of our values. So watch out and be on guard. "And Demas...in love with the present world has deserted me..." And the other thing I'm sure of is that a religious faith of meaningful depth - a faith undergirded by personal prayer and weekly worship and a commitment of service to others - such can save one from responding to such a poem with an answer of disillusionment. For all of the imperfections of pulpit and pew, God still uses worship to renew and to teach his children. This is the claim that Isaiah made long ago when he declared, "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength".

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For the God of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, keeps us at those unfinished tasks with the assurance that we shall not run out of power. "I can do all things in Him who strengthens me" it says in the Bible. Build on that. Take that line along with you. And may that assurance undergird us as we depart and return to those tasks of the world, "We can do all things in Him who strengthens us". With that as our anchor, we shall not end up like Demas forsaking the kingdom enterprise and deserting the call of God in Christ.

PRAYER

O God, Father of us all, in the quietness of these moments here at the end of this Homecoming Service of prayer and of praise, of joy and celebration, we would privately renew our commitment to You, and to the giving of ourselves in this Kingdom Enterprise. Brood over this congregation. Bless the individuals who are a part of this gathering. Unite and bless us collectively in our efforts. In the name and powerful Spirit of Christ, our Lord. Amen

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There's something of Demas in all of us. So be careful. Watch out for the subtle temptations of this city..and not so subtle at times... they can do a job on you and pull you away from those spiritual values that you had in great abundance the day you arrived here.

There isn't much we can do for Demas, but there is something we can do for ourselves, something we can do to strengthen our lives, our loyalties and guard ourselves against the temptation to step away. I remember a poem from other days that has been running through my mind as I pulled these thoughts for a sermon dealing with Demas and his life story. Here it is:

"Across the fields of yesterday, he sometimes comes to me,
A little lad just back from play - the lad I use to be.

And yet he smiles so wistfully, once he has crept within,
I wonder if he hopes to see the man I might have been."

I wonder how Demas would have felt had he repeated this poem to himself several years after his desertion of Paul and the Kingdom enterprise. I'm even more concerned about the effect it has on us today as we think of the tasks that involve our lives in the work of the Kingdom.

ONE THING I KNOW

One or two things I know. One is that this city takes its toll on all of our values. So watch out and be on guard. "And Demas...in love with the present world has deserted me..." And the other thing I'm sure of is that a religious faith of meaningful depth - a faith undergirded by personal prayer and weekly worship and a commitment of service to others - such can save one from responding to such a poem with an answer of disillusionment. For all of the imperfections of pulpit and pew, God still uses worship to renew and to teach his children. This is the claim that Isaiah made long ago when he declared, "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength".

And this claim was validated by Jesus in His experience of prayer and worship, so obviously renewing and restoring His energy and perspective that the disciples came to Him and said, "Lord, teach us how to pray".

For the God of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, keeps us at those unfinished tasks with the assurance that we shall not run out of power. "I can do all things in Him who strengthens me" it says in the Bible. Build on that. Take that line along with you. And may that assurance undergird us as we depart and return to those tasks of the world, "We can do all things in Him who strengthens us". With that as our anchor, we shall not end up like Demas forsaking the kingdom enterprise and deserting the call of God in Christ.

PRAYER

O God, Father of us all, in the quietness of these moments here at the end of this Homecoming Service of prayer and of praise, of joy and celebration, we would privately renew our commitment to You, and to the giving of ourselves in this Kingdom Enterprise. Bless the individuals who are a part of this gathering. Unite and bless us collectively in our efforts. In the name and powerful Spirit of Christ, our Lord. Amen