

## "THE WEEK THAT WAS"

INTRODUCTION In the life of every minister there come along some sermons that preach themselves. That is, they seem to emerge in spite of the plans and desires of the minister himself. This was the experience I had this week as I prepared for this morning.

On Wednesday morning my thoughts were already moving in a certain direction. I had a general theme in mind for the sermon. This was on Wednesday morning. By Wednesday evening, however, another theme began to press itself into my consciousness.

If you believe as I do that the pulpit is to be responsive to the events that the people in the pews are reading about and thinking about in their daily lives, perhaps you will think this is the explanation. It is part of it. Karl Barth, the great theologian, use to say that sermons should be prepared with the Bible in one hand, and the daily newspaper in the other.

The title for today's sermon is taken from the popular television program of the late 1960's, "The Week That Was". Let's think about three events that have touched our lives this week, taking them in the order in which they brushed up against us, and trying to bring to them the light and the love of the Gospel. First, the breakout of war in the Middle East; second, the resignation of our Vice-President; and third, the amazing, miraculous victory of the Mets.

THE WAR It struck me not only as strange, but also sad that the hostilities in the Middle East broke out on the holiest day of the year for the Jew, and during the holiest month of the year for the Arab. For the Jew, it was on Yom Kippur; for the Muslim, it was during the observance of Ramadan.

As you know, the tension and hostility between the Arab and the Jew, between Israel and its neighbors, goes back twenty-five years to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 by the world community, under the United Nations. Some will undoubtedly trace it back beyond that year to the turn of the century when Zionism made its advent; some will even say the seeds of the tension trace back to the Bible and the story of Abraham. Let me read to you a few lines from the book, The Religions of Man, by Huston Smith:

"The descendants of Adam lead to Noah who has a son named Shem. This is where the word Semite comes from; a Semite, literally, is a descendant of Shem. Like the Jews, the Arabs regard themselves as a Semitic people. The descendants of Shem are traced to Abraham and still we are within a common tradition.

Indeed, it was the submission of Abraham in the supreme test, the attempted sacrifice of his son described in the Koran by the verb ASLAMA, that appears to have provided Islam with its name.

Abraham marries Sarah. Sarah has no son and Abraham, wanting to continue his line, takes Hagar for his wife as well. Hagar bears him a son, Ishmael, whereupon Sarah also has a son named Issac. Sarah then demands that Abraham banish Ishmael and Hagar from the tribe. Here we come to the first divergence between the Koranic and Biblical accounts. According to the Koran, Ishmael goes to Mecca. His descendants, growing up in Arabia, are

Muslims whereas those of Issac, who remain in Palestine, are Jews."

It's helpful as well as interesting to me to recall that Jews and Arabs do have this common origin, this common tradition in terms of Abraham, this lineage back to the father of the faithful. ~~It's something for us to build on.~~

I do not profess to have answers to complex international problems. And without delving into the historical events of the past twenty-five years, or twenty-five centuries since Abraham to determine who is right and who is wrong, I do wish to raise with you the concern of the Christian's role in this war. I do this humbly and cautiously, with an awareness that the issues are complex, with an awareness that all of us have friends in this city who are deeply pro-Israel and also friends who are deeply pro-Arab. The passions run deep and strong on both sides. I well remember a trip I made to Palestine in 1954 as a student, not long after the War of 1948. We visited Israel; we visited Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt. We were exposed to both sides of the issues, and conditions and passions were similar to those that exist down to this moment.

For me, the role of the Christian first and foremost should be that of the peacemaker, and to charge the climate where he works and lives with words that remind people of the futility of war and the tragedy of bloodshed. Wars seldom, if ever, accomplish anything constructive, and the Bible reminds us again and again "that they that live by the sword shall perish by the sword". Jesus reminds us in those searching and relevant words from the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God".

Let us be aware of the futility of war to solve international problems and settle grievances, and to carry in our hearts at all times that glorious vision of the Old Testament prophet:

"And they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more".

Our hearts go out to the people of both sides caught up in this flareup of violence, to the families of those men and women shooting at each other across the stretches of the Sinai peninsula, and the hills of the Golan Heights. Peace is our concern, and we must assume the stance of peacemaker, of the agent of reconciliation.

There are three ways to put out a fire: cool it below the kindling temperature, withhold oxygen, or remove the fuel. There are at least three similar ways to extinguish a war: cool the inflamed passion of conflict, dissipate the poisonous atmosphere in which it flourishes, or withhold armaments. The world community of nations through the United Nations can best work in the area of reducing armaments, but all of us can assist in helping to "dissipate the poisonous atmosphere in which it flourishes".

#### THE VICE PRESIDENT

We were shaken a second time in the course of the week by the news of Wednesday afternoon that the Vice President of the United States had resigned from office, and thus the most dramatic political resignation in our nation's history came before us.

The reasons are there for all to read, and we can draw our own conclusions from the information that has been provided.

The decline and fall of any political figure has dramatically tragic overtones; it should be a reminder to many men of the fleeting quality of power and glory.

✓ We ought to feel deep sadness over what has taken place. We feel a sense of sadness for him, for his wife and children, for the measure of shame and disgrace that will accompany his name into the history books. We feel a sense of sadness, too, for ourselves, for we are a part of this climate of moral laxity that has come to condone the cutting of corners, the cheating on tax returns, the irresponsible manner in which we handle and hold vows and commitments. We're a part of this atmosphere that makes it easy for one to say to himself, "Everybody's doing it....there's nothing wrong with it." ~~Many have been more intent in recent years in electing leaders with a touch of charisma than with a tinge of character.~~ There is a sadness in what has happened; it is but one more evidence of the crumbling of the walls of integrity that hold our society together.

To me, it is a dramatic, visible reminder of a Biblical truth that "we reap what we sow".

I think we lose our sense of integrity when we lose the sense that this is a moral world. One of the key issues is how you see the world. If it's a world where it's every man for himself, then it is only sensible for each of us to get all he can, and it's tough for the man who is left out.

Going back to the Bible, we find that the early pages of the Old Testament are filled with stories which indicate that this was pretty much the world view with which its people lived. Cleverness was regarded as far more of a virtue than honesty. And you can tick off those familiar stories. Here's Jacob, for instance, deceiving his father in order to win a birthright by putting on some of his brother's after shave lotion - the great inheritance swindle. Here is Laban, Jacob's future father-in-law, refusing to give the young man the bride that he has worked seven years to gain - the broken contract. Here is Jacob as an old man, deceived by his sons who have sold his favorite son into Egypt as a slave. These stories read like the "God father" all over again. The cycle goes on and on for generation and generation and nobody is breaking it. You can see the truth of that old proverb, "Unhappy is the man who tells a lie because he can never believe that anyone else is telling him the truth".

I believe ultimately the key question is really whether you understand this to be a world where privatism is the name of the game, where the aim of the successful life is to get all you can no matter how your trample other people, or use them. If that is the kind of world you think this is, then I can see why you would feel free to lie, to cheat, to deceive, to steal until you get caught.

But - the very fact that you have come to worship means that this is not the truth about the world as you understand it. The man of faith believes that he lives in a moral universe, where a lie will not endure forever, where integrity and trust are the real name of the game. He believes that the goal of life is not just to get, but to give. He believes that people are responsible for one another under the one God who is the Father of us all. The man of faith believes that there are some objective truths built into the very fabric and structure of the universe that cannot be brushed away, and that there is a judgment on our lives which we cannot evade.

Earlier this week, as I settled into the back seat of a cab, the driver began to share with me his philosophy of life. I wasn't anxious to hear it, but neverthe-

less he went ahead. It ran something like this. "Yes, sir....this is a dog-eat-dog world; you gotta get the other guy before he gets you. And I'm gonna get mine and get it now; I'll lie, cheat, do anything, but I'm gonna get mine".

I began to feel a sense of real discomfort, and remarked to him, "Well, in that case I better keep my eye on the meter". That threw him momentarily, and then he said something that stayed with me. "No, I wouldn't do a thing like that to you; why if I did, the worms would gag in my bones". I had never heard that expression before, and I must admit it is a rather picturesque way of putting it, but it says it. He had the sense that something in this universe, even if only a worm, would stand in judgement over him for his dishonesty. In whose world do we really think we are living? That is a religious question.

There another's truth that needs to be lifted up here in connection with this before we move on to the last point, and I do this in order to introduce into your thinking the element of compassion as well as judgement. There's a biblical word which says "Judge not lest ye be judged". It reminds us that no man is perfect, and that pointing accusatory fingers is a risky business for any of us, for when one finger points to someone else, the other three fingers point at the accuser. Try it some time. Judgement for the Christian needs to be tempered with the quality of mercy.

#### THE METS WIN

By late Wednesday afternoon, we knew that the Mets had won the pennant, that somehow they had fought their way back from last place in their division to first place in the National League. And whatever else happens in the Series, the world looked a little better momentarily for New Yorkers for this fantastic feat. We were reminded that the last time the Mets won the pennant, man performed another miracle - that of walking on the moon.

Now, I'm not putting this miraculous victory of the Mets on the same level as life and death, disgrace and heartbreak, but if we let it the overtones of this victory in the stadium can spill over into life's other arenas and provide us with a spark of hope. (I'm sure Yogi B. and Ralph H. could have fun with that one)

It reminds us of the Biblical truth that "The first shall be last and the last shall be first". It reminds us, too, that miracles do happen, even in today's world - miracles of healing and of reconciliation between people and among the nations, that things can happen that we didn't think possible. Faith in ourselves, in others working together, and in a power greater than man himself can still run up some unbelievable scores and victories. Never forget that. When you're down and out and think it's all over, don't give up. The tables do turn and the bounces do begin to come your way.

Back in the early Summer when the Mets were having so many injuries and it looked like it was going to be a lot, hot Summer and that Yogi might not survive, one of the Mets said something that was quoted in the papers. I clipped it. It was Tug McGraw and he was quoting something from Emerson. "Maybe, as Emerson said, on the debris of our despair we build character. Maybe that's what I'm doing". Anyway it's a good thought. "On the debris of despair, character is often built". They've made believers of all of us, and if it helps to remind us that miracles can and still do occur, then I'm all for it.

It's hard to believe that it was ten years ago this November that Kennedy was assassinated. And what a decade you and I have lived through. As a columnist put it the other day in the paper:

"We saw a man walk on the moon, LIVE, on our TV, in our own homes, on a device that our parents couldn't have imagined any more than they could have foreseen a five hour jet hop to Europe. We saw unbelievable violence...the assassination of John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King. We saw massacres at the Olympics in Munich, Vietnam, Kent State and Attica....the narcotization of youth, the sex revolution, pornography. We saw Watergate....finally we saw a Vice President refuse to resign. Then we saw him resign. At times I feel we've got congratulations due us for just surviving."

Wars and violence. Deceit and deception. It's all around us. And yet, in our better moments we believe that there is something else, too. More to life than all of this....something probing our spirits, challenging our hopes, disturbing our consciences, haunting our dreams. As a philosopher said,

"One day after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, after all the scientific and technological achievements, we shall harness for God the energies of love.

And then - for the second time in the long history of mankind - man will have discovered fire."

LET US PRAY Help us, Father, to harness for thee the energies of love. Remind us that miracles do still happen in areas of human relationships. And that there is no limit to what faith in others and in ourselves and ultimately can accomplish.

Forgive us for our human failings. Restore within us a sense of life's dignity and its nobility. All of this we ask in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen