

"WHAT ABOUT TOMORROW?"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street, New York
February 24, 1985
First Sunday in Lent, 1985

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INTRODUCTION

It seems like the decades of our life serve as milestones, marking our journey through life. Several years ago I passed one of them. I won't tell you which one it was, but let me tell you how its significance was brought home to me. I was watching a television commercial featuring one of those oldtime actors, now retired. He was talking about a company that offers life insurance for older people, one of those policies that doesn't ask questions or require a physical examination. He gave the age requirements for this type of insurance and I recall feeling at the time, "I'm eligible for that...maybe I should look in to it." Anyway,

Some time after that I received a call from an insurance agent telling me that some term insurance I had would soon be expiring and perhaps I should consider buying a new one. He said something like this, "You know, it's going to be harder for you now...you'll need to have a physical examination". And then after reminding me that I should be more concerned about my retirement years, he offered to drop off some information regarding some tax shelters, some IRA's that he wanted me to see. And...I guess it wasn't too long after that that the words I've chosen for today's text began to dwell in my mind.

"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about tomorrow; tomorrow will be anxious for itself"

DEVELOPMENT

I confess to a little anxiety about tomorrow, much more than I had before I learned that insurance companies are not all that interested in having me as a client any more. I confess to you that I come to this text today feeling a little bit different about it than I did 10 years ago.

The first thing that I noticed was that it does not say, "Do not make provision for tomorrow". It says, "Do not be anxious about tomorrow". You have to make provision for tomorrow. Jesus said, "Consider the lilies of the fields and the birds of the air. They are not anxious about tomorrow". I could say, "Consider the squirrels of the forest, and how they gather acorns for the long Winter." Pick your critter and draw your own moral. You've got to make provision for tomorrow, unless you've got some relatives who will let you move in with them. Mine are all generally shiftless, so if I'm going to provide for tomorrow I guess I'll have to do it for myself....

And it's hard. A penny saved is almost impossible. I can't figure it out but it seems that when I made less I had more. Someone gave me the new revised 1040 Income Tax return. It's simplified with only two lines. The first line said, "How much money did you earn last year?" And the second line said, "Send it in." It's getting harder to save; you've noticed that, too. And you've got to provide for tomorrow.

A young man received a letter from his ex-fiance. It read like this:

"Dear John: Words cannot express the deep regret I have for having broken our engagement. Will you take me back? Your absence leaves me empty and no one else can fill the void. Please forgive me and let us start again. I love you. Your adoring Sally. PS: And congratulations for having won the Irish Sweepstakes."

You've got to provide for tomorrow.

Of course, there are honorable and dishonorable ways of doing that, but that's a different text. This one says, "Do not be anxious about tomorrow." It doesn't say, "Do not provide for tomorrow."

TODAY IS THE GIFT GIVEN TO US

The point that Jesus is trying to make is that today is what you're supposed to give your attention to. Today is here as a gift given to you. You're to enjoy it. And if you are anxious about tomorrow, then tomorrow has got your attention, and you'll end up missing what is given to you today. I've known people who have spent the first half of their lives seeking something that they didn't have, and then spent the second half of their lives trying to recover what they missed. It's not about tomorrow...it's about today and the way God provides for it. To believe in God means that He provides all that you need today. You may want more, but you don't need it. And what this text is saying to us is that God provides all that you need today. It's all there as grace.

You know how you can tell that? Remember those experiences where you were taken to the edge, out to the extremity of life, and when you were safe again and when things returned to normal, things no longer appeared as merely normal. They were wonderful. Wonder - full. Things that you had taken for granted... like walking, or eating a good meal, or sitting in the sun on a clear day, or walking along the beach in the late afternoon. Those things were no longer merely normal...they were wonderful. Those simple things hadn't changed, you had changed. You saw things differently now. You now had a different perspective. Today had a new significance and enjoying what you had today was more important than what was going to happen tomorrow.

I've seen the same heightened appreciation of what we have when someone near us dies. Death has the same effect of intensifying the present. It places us on a vast, lonely and desolate plain, as if we are abandoned. And then someone comes to you and embraces you and tells you that they care for you and are concerned about you. And it's like being rescued. And you probably don't think about it at the time, but later you will recall that that was one of the most treasured moments of your life - and it was free and unplanned, a gift - like grace.

And I've seen the same realization of what is really important in life when a family goes through a crisis. Their normal life is one of distraction, everyone going his or her own way...their routine as smooth as glass. And then the routine is shattered. And two things happen. The people in that family either fly apart or they come back together, bonded anew by words that they could not say to each other until the crisis came. But they said them, and it brought them together. That family at that moment doesn't even think about tomorrow. Today is set in parentheses - underlined - everything else is unimportant in comparison with the joy of that moment.

You may not have all you want, but if you have health and strength to do your work, and friends and family who care for you - you have all you need. You may want more, and that's the danger. You may want more, and wanting more may distract you from seeing that which you already have in abundance. Why is it that we have to be hit over the head before we see that there is grace all about us, giving us all that we need? That there is light and love enough for every step of the way.

I selected the middle hymn for this morning because of its title. It's also based on today's text, which is another good reason for selecting it. And I'll tell you this now so you won't have to write me a note on the back of the bulletin and put it in the Poor Box, asking, "Why, on earth, did you pick that hymn this morning?" Yes, I selected it because of its beautiful title, "Sometimes a Light Surprises!" Granted...that Welsh melody isn't that familiar to most of us over here, but by the last line of the last verse you were beginning to pick it up. But what a beautiful phrase that is. To me, it expresses our faith that our lives are guided by Providence. When we're there at the extremity of our life, and our attention is focused on the present, then we can see that Providence. When our attention is on the future, and we're tense and anxious about tomorrow, it's hard to see.

SURVIVAL STORIES

I'm fascinated with survival stories. I suppose it's because they illustrate that when we are at the end of our rope and the end of our power there is another power still at work. But I'm also made uneasy by them because there are as many stories of tragedy and disaster as there are of survival. If you were to ask me why that is so, why is there tragedy, I would have to answer, "I don't know." I don't think anybody knows. There are some reasons people give, and I don't believe them. I just don't think we know. But there is another way of asking the question. Why is there miraculous survival against all odds? That to me is the greater mystery.

Last Summer I read a survival story about Steven Callahan who drifted alone on a nylon raft on the Atlantic Ocean after being shipwrecked. He drifted for 76 days all by himself. And he said,

"It's so awesome...so incomprehensibly complicated, so incredible that I do not ever expect to even understand it. For example (he said) in the raft-voyage several things happened which if not miraculous, certainly border on the miraculous. So many things fit together that it's a great mystery...."

THIS STORY

Let me tell you more about his story. He - Callahan - grew up in Dover, Massachusetts, surrounded by boats. He was sailing by the time he was six. He was sailing by himself by the time he was 12. As a young man he went into the business and built boats for his own company, wrote articles for sailing magazines. His whole life was sailing. He read Robert Manry's book Tinkerbelle - the story of his journey across the Atlantic in a 13 foot boat all by himself. The romance of that adventure grabbed Callahan, so that for years his only ambition was to be in that race.

Well, in 1981 he qualified for the Mini-Transat - a single-handed race from Penzance, England across the Atlantic to Antigua in the West Indies. On September 26, 1982 he began the race in gale force winds. Five boats sank almost immediately, and Callahan's boat was disabled. He sailed into the harbor at La Coruna, Spain for repairs. From there he eventually went on to the Canary Islands, and then from the Canary Islands he started for Antigua.

On February 4th, just a few days out of the Canary Islands, at midnight, he was asleep in his bunk. Something hit the boat. He thought it must have been a whale. In 30 seconds his boat was swamped, the bow and the companionway completely under water. The boat was going down. He bolted out of his bunk, grabbed

a knife and tried to fetch his emergency duffle bag, but couldn't find it. He went on to the deck, slashed the life raft loose, yanked the fire head, the raft inflated. With his knife in his teeth he jumped into the raft. The raft was fastened to the boat. He sat there for a while and noticed that the boat did not sink. The stern stayed out of the water, evidently because of air pockets. Despite six to nine foot waves he went back to the boat, dove under the water into the cabin to find his emergency duffle and anything else he could grab and pull out. And then back to his life raft. The law of boatmen is to stay with the craft, because often they don't sink at all, so he decided to sit there in the raft and wait out the night to see if in daylight he could make repairs. But just before dawn the rope tying the raft to the boat broke in high seas and he began to float away and thus started his 76 day ordeal.

SEVERAL THINGS HAPPENED

Now for what happened in the days that followed.

Almost immediately the first of several amazing things occurred. A school of 50 dorado came up to his raft, close enough to spear them with a spear gun that he had bought just before he left the Canary Islands. And that, too, was a mystery because he thought at the time, "I really don't need this spear gun". And he almost didn't buy it, but he bought it because it was such a good bargain. He used the gun to catch dorado almost at will. Without the gun he probably would have starved. The dorado followed him for the full 1800 miles. During the day they'd go away to feed, but at night they would come back and stay under the raft. It was like having a pool of fish in your backyard.

On the 43rd day afloat he speared one of those dorados. The fish struggled, rammed the point of the spear into the raft, ripping a four-inch hole in the bottom tube. Water rushed in. He said it was like sitting on jelly in that raft. For the next week he struggled to close that hole. But every time he pumped in air the pressure would blow the patch out. The sharks moved in closer as he worked on the patch with his hands under the water. Finally, frustrated, he broke down and cried and cursed, threw a tantrum. And then something said to him, "You're going to die if you don't calm down. Think again. Go through everything that you have and see if there isn't something that you can do to find a solution". And then he remembered a Boy Scout fork in his utensil kit. It was perfect. He gathered up the nylon around the hole and rammed the fork through the nylon and then bent back the handle. And it held. It worked.

April 21st. He approached Maria Galanta Island. The island is surrounded by coral. It's impossible to cross the coral. He knew the raft was going to be ripped to shreds. He was thinking, "This is the end" Weakened to the point of exhaustion he doubted that he could make it, but he still wrapped himself in the canvass rain catcher in an attempt to survive the coral reef.

A RESCUE

And then he saw them. The frigate birds circling overhead. The birds had seen the dorados under the raft. Circling birds are a sign to fishermen. Three fishermen saw them and followed the sign. They were professional fishermen. They fished every day. They had never fished in that area before, the windward side of Galanta Island. Never before had they been there. They just happened to be there on that day. Callahan said,

"I just looked and there they were...it is so incomprehensibly complicated. I don't expect to understand it. So

many coincidences that saved me...so many things just fit together. It's a mystery."

That's a survival story. But...I wonder if it is not also an everyday story and we don't see it, because we are distracted by so many things. When you are out there on the extremity of things...like a raft and all alone on the sea of life...then you see it. Then your attention is focused on the day, on the present. Then you see the coincidences, those things that fit together that can't be explained. Then you see the mystery of it all. But when you are in normal times, making a career, doing a job, worrying about all those many things that you and I tend to worry about, then you don't see the coincidences, the many things that happen as grace - the mysteries. Maybe God intervenes and surprises us all of our days, but we don't see the gift of today because we're so darn anxious about tomorrow.

BACK TO JESUS

But back to Jesus. I think He wants us to see that there is no point in believing in God, in the one that He taught us to call "Father"...There's really no point in believing in Him, if we don't believe that He cares for us. And if we would see each day as a gift and let tomorrow take care of itself, then we would see how He moves each day, "in a mysterious way His wonders to perform." And that's why He said:

"Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat and what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your Heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? Don't be anxious. Your Heavenly Father knows what you need. Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.

Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself."

A Jewish Rabbi understood all of this. He came to it another way, but he arrived where Jesus would have us be. He said, "I did not ask for success, I asked for wonder. You gave it to me." May this day be for each of you, a wonderful - wonder-full day!

PRAYER

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