

"WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH"

A Sermon By

Philip A. G. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
October 25, 1998

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### INTRODUCTION

Two country boys named Zeke and Zeb built a Bungee Jumping Tower down in Mexico in order to make some money. After they got it up, they were disappointed that nobody was giving it a try even though crowds had gathered around it. Ticket sales weren't happening and so Zeke had an idea. He suggested to his friend, Zeb, that he should demonstrate the jump in order to help people get the idea. After Zeb was strapped on he jumped and fell almost to the ground before springing back up. But as he came back up Zeke noticed that Zeb's clothes were torn and he wondered....what that was all about.

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We've all had those moments in life when we have felt like a human pinata....haven't we? Those times when we have been "jabbed" and "punched" and "whacked" from every side. But then when I read about the Apostle Paul, in chains...not gold chains, mind you, like some men wear today...but heavy prison chains and languishing in jail. And his only crime was being a follower of Jesus. When I contrast our concerns and our problems with those that Paul was experiencing, our problems...my problems...seem quite trivial.

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"For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. And I have kept the faith. Now...there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day - and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for His appearing.

And Paul continues...

"At my first defense no one came to my support, but every one deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to the heavenly kingdom. To Him be the GLORY for ever and ever. Amen."

What a magnificent testimony to what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. What a magnificent testimony to the sustaining power of God!

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Several things to pick up in all of this. First, notice that there is a certain weariness in Paul's voice as he says, "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith". These words were not written at the beginning of his life, but near its end.

It's a wonderful thing to be young...isn't it? Raise a hand, if you agree. To have all that energy and all that enthusiasm. To believe that nothing is impossible to you. To believe in happy endings. But, friend... that is not as easy toward the end of life as it is when you are first starting out...with all that energy and enthusiasm. It's more difficult when all of your friends have gone and your health is failing and you worry about what tomorrow may bring.

I read about a lady who wrote her son the following note,

"Rabbi Abrahams came to call on me the other day and he said that at my age I should be thinking of the here-after. I told him, 'OH....BUT I DO IT ALL THE TIME... NO MATTER WHERE I AM....IN THE LIVING ROOM, UPSTAIRS, IN THE KITCHEN, OR DOWN IN THE BASEMENT...I ASK MYSELF, NOW WHAT IS IT THAT I AM HERE AFTER?'"

I thought you'd like that. Aging has its challenges and it's not so easy near the end of life. This is not to say that you can always judge a person by his or her age. George Bush, at the age of 72, jumps out of a plane and parachutes to the ground. Tony Randall, 77, between eight Broadway performances a week, summons the energy to father a child with his 27 year-old wife. Women past 50 bearing children. Octogenarians entering marathons and finishing them. Indeed, the experience of aging in America isn't what it used to be!

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The list goes on. Bob Hope, 95, still performing. Strom Thurmond, 96, still legislating for the state of South Carolina. John Glenn, 77, talking about going back into space. NO...aging isn't what it used to be!

But still...aging has its challenges and its disappointments. If we are not careful, fantasy gives way to fatalism. Faith...if it's not nourished... gives way to despair. It could have happened to Paul. He writes,

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"WE CARE ABOUT YOU". And underneath in smaller letters it said, "SUNDAYS at TEN A.M....ONLY"

We smile and some may even laugh, but it can also make you cry. Yes, it happens. Jesus hand-picked twelve men and one of them betrayed Him. Paul gave his life and love and all he had to starting some churches and some of his closest friends in those church let him down. Where were they? No wonder we catch or hear just a touch of weariness in his oive.

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Paul, as I see it, knew that his lifetime of faithfulness would not be in vain and that there was this CROWN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS bestowed by God's own Son awaiting him.

Barbara Johnson, a Christian writer and speaker, who runs a ministry for people "in pain" has shared a bit of wisdom, an insight for us. Her own life has been touched by tragedy and pain. Her husband was involved in a car wreck thirty years ago that left him permanently injured. Their oldest son was killed in Vietna, and their other son was killed by a drunken driver. And for many years they were estranged from still another son and yet, in spite of all of their sorrow and pain, they never lost their faith in a loving God. She writes in one of her books that

"God didn't promise that we'd be leading at the half, but only that we will win the game...."

Indeed, a bit of wisdom that probably resonates more with those of you who are football fans, but what a grand message for anyone feeling like a human pinata. "God didn't promise that we'd be leading at the half....but only that we will win the game". There was that note of weariness in Paul's voice...from all the trials and tribulations he had been through, but there was also that sound of victory...because he knew that he would receive a great reward. How did he know this. He knew because God had been with him every step of the way! Through hardships and heartaches, Paul had always felt God standing by his side. His expectation of this much-deserved reward was not based on wishful thinking, but on his own experience. Hear his words once again,

"At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth".

CLOSING STORY AND SUMMATION

A few years ago, Norman Vincent Peale, and his wife, Ruth, were in a taxi here in the city and found themselves in conversation with the driver who had a Dutch name which prompted Dr. Peale to ask if he was from Europe.

"Yes" said the driver, "I'm from Rotterdam". "Well," replied Dr. Peale, "I was the minister of the old Dutch Reformed Church here in the city for 52 years." "Oh" commented the driver...."Then you're Dr. Peale....I've been to your church but I didn't recognize you without your robe"....and they had a nice chat in the moments that followed.

As they drove along, the driver asked him if he had the time to hear a story. He said, "It's about the time I met God and it shows just how good God is. I have great faith, sir...and I know that I can never get outside the care and love of God." And he began to share this story with Dr. and Mrs. Peale.

"It was close to the end of World War II....I was a little boy and our country had been ravaged. The conquerors had been driven out, but we were left absolutely destitute. We had ration stamps, but they weren't any good for there was no food at all...no food in the stores or the warehouses or country. Holland had been swept clean of foodstuffs. We were reduced to eating beets out of the fields. It was a kind of beet that is dangerous to eat without long cooking. And even then, if you don't accompany it with other food, the chemical reaction will bloat and distend the stomach... people have been known to die from the chemical that they absorbed from an overdose."

He continued with the story...

"You know how beautiful Holland's tulips are? Well, we dug the bulbs out of the ground and ate them. That was all we had....we were desperate. Then a notice from our pastor went around, telling us that there would be a meeting in the church. Since we were reduced to final circumstances, we would have a meeting and PRAY to God, telling Him we were His children and asking Him to feed us. It was the only hope we had. That big church was packed...two thousand people were present. There was no sermon. We prayed for an hour or two...the pastor prayed. People prayed aloud all over the church. We sat there...herded together, praying to God".

"I was only a youngster, but all of a sudden, I became aware that God was right there...and I was almost frightened. I could feel HIM in my heart. I knew that HE was present and I knew that HE was going to take care of us poor starving people. And then we sang one of those great hymns of faith and we went out into the streets and back to our homes and with a gnawing, empty stomach, I fell asleep."

"Early the next morning, we were awakened by the roar of a great armada of airplanes over Rotterdam and there began a great shower of food. It seemed that the sky was full of great packages of food floating down to the streets of Rotterdam, filling the avenues with fine food. And...we ate and we ate!"

The driver glanced back at the Peales from his seat up front and said,

"Dr. Peale...as long as I live, I will believe that God heard those prayers and out of His great heart of love, He fed His children."

END OF STORY

End of story. But let me say this. I believe it, too. And certainly Paul believed it. In spite of his troubled life as a human pinata, he wrote:

"But the Lord stood at my side and gave me great strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth".

And then, the amazing thing to me is that Paul's adds a doxology to all of this. Even though he is weary and disappointed with many of his friends who let him down...with this expectation that a CROWN OF GLORY await him, he writes:

"The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom. To HIM be the glory, forever and ever. Amen."

What a doxology. Such is the gift of a great and a glorious faith. We can have it, too. And let that be our affirmation today and in the days ahead. "To HIM...be the glory, forever and ever. Amen."

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your lifting presence in these moments, O God. Wrestle with us in the hidden corners of our lives where lack of faith so often robs us of health and hope and of peace of mind. Give us the gift of a faith like Paul's that we may endure to the end and praise You all of our days. In the spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

INTRODUCTION / GREETING

ministry of our Church.

How nice it is to have both Michael and Susan Reaves participating in the work and

Both are preparing for the ministry at the Theological School of Drew University in Madison, New Jersey. Michael has been teaching the Sunday morning Adult Bible Class and sharing in the worship service. Susan has been working with the boys and girls of our Sunday School and today they are switching roles....

We are blessed to have them both with us this year...from now through early June. Get to know them...and their daughters, too - Michelle and Rachel....here with the boys and girls of our Sunday School...whom we are delighted to welcome to today's service.

It's always special when the children are down here with us and today is no exception....and Susan Reaves is going to talk to them about baptism....which we shall celebrate here in a few moments!

SUSAN REAVES

SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

Thank you, Susan.....I'll join you in a few moments at the baptismal font...but first, let me welcome and introduce to you those whom we are baptizing....

FIRST: Grace Elizabeth Catlett, infant daughter of David and Stephanie Catlett...born July 31st, 1998. Lenox Hill Hospital.

SECOND: Gregory Ernst Catlett.....infant son of David and Stephanie....also born on July 31st, 1998.

TWINS....I've been trying to remember if I have ever had the joy and privilege of baptizing twins before in this church...have I? Can any of you remember...confirmed twins....Kittilsen sisters...now off in college in Boston...never could tell them apart.

Today is very special for us and made even more special by the presence of GOD PARENTS:

For Grace: Paul and Christine ERNST

For Gregory: Carl and Kerry ERNST....

And GRANDPARENTS ARE present: Ralph and Marie Ernst...of Seaford, Long Island. And David Catlett's twin brother and family all the way from Colorado: Larry and Tena Catlett....children Cheryl and Dean.

The name ERNST is a special name in this church because of the presence and life of Janet Ernst, a longtime member of this parish....and also the town of Seaford, out on Long Island...because that is George Leopold's home town. We welcome you! Delighted you all are here!

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, October 25, 1998

VISITORS / GREETING

- A. A word of greeting to the visitors....delighted to welcome you and to have you here with us....we hope that the opportunity.... BE FREE in the sharing.....FILL OUT....SIGN ONE....COME, WORSHIP WITH US.....COME, WORK WITH US, TOO.....
- B. I like to say that we have been DOING THE LORD'S WORK....roots are deep.....fourth building....we minister in the NAME OF CHRIST and it is in HIS LOVING SPIRIT.....
- C. MEMBERS: name tags. GO OUT OF YOUR WAY....REACH DOWN AND GREET a child....NO CHURCH BUSINESS gets down at the coffee hour...our chance to enjoy each other's company...
- D. TWO WEEKS FROM TODAY...NOVEMBER 8th....that Sunday's coffee hour will be "in honor" of new friends of recent months...

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns are lifted up for you in the bulletin. Review them on your own noting:
  - 1. Worship Committee Meeting today at 1 pm.
  - 2. Fall RUMMAGE SALE this coming Saturday...
  - 3. Approaching November...the month of our financial canvass...fund raising effort for 1999..."kicking it off" next Sunday and it continues through the end of the year.
  - 4. Church Fair is approaching. November 21st. "Pick-up" service is being offered. Do your "FAIR SHARE".....
  - 5. Great Fiction Book Club. Thursday evening. 7 pm. Church or parsonage....speak to me if you're.....

OFFERING

"GIVE...and it will be GIVEN YOU....a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over...will be put into your lap, for the measure you give will be the measure you get back!"

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