

## "WHEN THE POWER FAILS"

### INTRODUCTION

This sermon began to take form late Tuesday afternoon, around 5:30, when the power failed and the lights went out in nearly all of New York City, parts of nine Northeastern states and also in two provinces of southeastern Canada. Some 80,000 square miles, in which perhaps 25 million people live and work, were affected.

What happened is now a part of the history of this city, this nation, and certainly a vivid memory in the life of each one of us. Today, tomorrow and for many years to come New Yorkers will be telling stories of the night the lights went out - stories of hardship and suffering, of courage and unexpected courtesy, of humor and human warmth under the most difficult circumstances. Everyone has a story, a memory of how he or she was caught up in the dark web that paralyzed the life of this great city.

### POWER FAILURE - IN THE LIFE OF THE CITY

This was the largest power failure in modern times, and it happened at the worst possible hour of the day. The city lost its brightness, its glitter, and yet, New Yorkers, who are getting more and more accustomed to crisis situations seemed to ~~respond in good fashion and~~ take the blackout in stride.

We are told that the people of this city responded magnificently. War itself couldn't have melted and molded the people with greater demonstrations of courtesy and kindness. Why New Yorkers were found to be communicating aloud with total strangers, a phenomenon believed to have been reserved for Judgment Day. ~~As one person remarked (who was caught in the subway), "The people were wonderful. Why they even let the ladies out first".~~

Tuesday night could easily have brought terror and chaos to a metropolis as diverse and violent as New York. But the cement that holds any good society together - mutual trust - held firm for 12 hours. Somehow this city seems suddenly warmer and dearer because we all had a long dark night of the soul - together - when the power failed. And it is reassuring to know that when the power does fail, the city faces a crisis, that the people can pull together, ~~put their shoulders to the wheel,~~ and that kindness, trust, courtesy become the order of the day.

### POWER FAILURE - IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

Power failures can occur in other areas of life as well as in the life of the modern city.

For instance, it can happen in the life of the church. The church is not dependent upon electrical power to maintain its life; it is dependent upon spiritual power. When it ceases to be a dynamic, pulsating force and power in the life of people and in the life of the world, when it ceases to cast a strong light in a darkened society, when its influence is weak and powerless, we would say that it has experienced a power failure. Some there are who would say that it has already happened, or is happening - a power failure, that is, in the life of the Christian Church.

And just as a full scale investigation is under way to determine the causes of the power failure of last Tuesday, so we in the church need to have a similar investigation in order to find out what's happening, to find out why - with so many members on our fells and so many buildings, the church in our day does not have more power, more influence for good in the world. ~~I fear that any such investigation would uncover facts and confirm bits of information and some opinions that all of us have in the back of our minds concerning the church.~~ There has been a power failure; we can not pin it down to a particular moment; it has been slow in coming, slow in building up.

Why, we ask? What is the cause of it? How can we work to overcome it? I think a great deal of it stems from the fact that the church has not managed to keep in touch with the times. It has tended to look to the past rather than the future; it has tended to isolate itself from the main currents of life where the action is. We find that people look to it to lead rather than to follow, they look to it for help in understanding the problems of modern day life, and in so many instances it has failed to shed a bright light. The language is the language of yesterday; the liturgy is the liturgy of yesterday-year. The methods and forms and structures were designed to meet the needs of an agrarian society. The church has experienced a power failure because it has been out of touch with the time in which it lives. We are working hard now to get caught up. The world is threatening to pass us by. And thank God for men ~~like the late Pope John and others~~ who have set themselves to the task of opening the church to the world, for making it relevant to today's explosive conditions, to make it a strong power for unity, peace and justice.

Perhaps this is the place to make reference to the reports that we have been receiving recently in the papers and one or two magazines about the "death of God". If you read the report of God's death in the October 22nd issue of TIME magazine or the article in the October 17th issue of the NEW YORK TIMES, you may have been somewhat shaken and jarred by all of this. What do these men, these "death of God" theologians mean when they speak of the death of God. Mind you, these are men in our theological schools whose feeling and concern for the church runs deep.

Is it that our traditional ideas about God have little meaning, little evidence for support? Perhaps this is what they are saying to us. If this is it, there is much truth in what they are suggesting. For example, the God who deliberately sends sickness and death as a punishment for our sins - that God has died. Or, the God who holds our sins against us until we beg for mercy - that God has died. Or, the God who created the universe in six days - that God has died. Or, the God who moves men on the chessboard of history, leaving them virtually no freedom to make decisions of their own, that God has died. Or, the God who sees human beings as miserable sinners whose salvation depends on neat formulas of faith - that God has died. Perhaps it is not so much that God has died as it is that he has changed his name and that what men once thought was a part of his nature has been left behind in the shadows of history and the thoughts of another century. I do not feel that the source of our spiritual power is dead, but I do feel that our lines of communication with him are in need of being examined, re-newed, re-built...in light of the knowledge we have re. the universe.

Suppose we look at this power failure from another point of view. Spiritual power is necessary, essential, if the church is to throw out a strong light to the world. Financial power is also necessary. A church cannot operate effectively in the modern world without adequate financial under-girding. It is amazing that the church manages to do as well as it does under the conditions. When our financial power is weak, when it is insufficient to meet the growing need, when it is handled hapzardly by its members, the church cannot be strong and effective. The gloom settles, the darkness deepends, the many good works it could do do not get done.

Here's a bit of verse that was given to me this past week by one of our laymen:

"Three thousand for my brand new car,  
Five thousand for a piece of sod.  
Ten thousand I paid to begin a house  
A dollar I gave to God.  
A tidy sum to entertain my friends in pointless chatter,  
And when the world goes crazy mad, I ask,  
"Lord, what's the matter?"

Yet, there is one big question,  
For the answer I still search;  
"With things so bad in this old world,  
What's holding back the church?"

"What's holding back the church?" - perhaps this is a question that has crossed your mind. Part of the answer rests at this point - its financial under-girding is weak, insufficient on many occasion to get the job done. The church can take a little and make it stretch a long, long way. But mind you, you will never build the Kingdom of God on earth from "left-overs". And that's what it is with many. What is left-over after everything else has been taken care of. You'll never build a strong church if you approach it this way. Many times nothing is left over. When we begin to put the church first, not last, then its power will begin to increase.

Today you have had a fine statement regarding our financial goals and aspirations for the coming year. What you do, as a congregation, will determine whether this church experiences a power failure in the coming year. Our goal in pledges is \$35,000. It can be reached if each person does his part. It will require increases in present pledges. It will require new pledges - at least 25 new ones....from members and from friends. I would remind you of this, and I say this with all of the urgency and conviction that are a part of my being: the church stands today at the cross roads in the urban centers of America. If it fails to receive a fresh infusion of spiritual power and financial power, it will not go forward. It will slip into the darkness and the darkness will eventually hide it from our view. "With things so bad in this old world, what's holding back the church?" It's struggling for its very life. Give it your support. And help us to get the job done.

#### POWER FAILURE - IN OUR LIVES

Suppose we look at the idea of a power failure from still another point of view.

When the power fails in our lives - what then? And it does happen. Life with its many uncertainties, its twists, turns, and troubles, can send even the best and bravest among us into the shadows of darkness where bewilderment, confusion and fear are lurking. When the lights go out, what then? It may be an accident, or an illness, or a sudden death of one close and dear, or the loss of a job, or the loss of a reputation. When the lights go out in our lives, what then?

Several things to consider. One thing is to keep on going, not to give in, or give up, or to slip into the bad habit of feeling sorry for yourself. When the lights go out, we need to keep on going in the assurance that it is only temporary. I don't know how many of you happened to read in the papers on Wednesday that the lights went out in Carnegie Hall right in the middle of a performance given by Vladimir Horowitz. He had just started to play Chopin's "Polonaise", rehearsing for the forthcoming program before an invited audience of about 200. And although the hall was pitch black, Mr. Horowitz went right on playing this difficult work, not missing a note. Not missing a note! When the lights go out in our lives, and the power fails, we need to keep on going, playing the piece life has called us to play - trying not to miss a note! It takes courage. It takes stamina, courage and stamina that are born of a strong faith and inner life.

Another thing to remember is that help comes, and so often it comes from the most unexpected sources, from unexpected people. In the case of Mr. Horowitz, a stage hand rushed out with a flash-light and focused it on the keys. Another touching story that bears this out also came out of the events of Tuesday night. A woman on her way home from work remarked, "I was trying to find the curb to step off it. Then I heard the tapping of a cane behind me. A man's voice said 'May I help you?' I took his arm, and for the first time in my life I was taken across the street by a blind man"

Help comes, and it comes in unexpected ways and from those you least expect it.

Tuesday night around nine o'clock I was walking in the darkness up Park Avenue from 60th Street where I had attended a candle-light supper meeting of the Protestant Council at Christ Church. As I walked by Lenox Hill Hospital with my good friend, Rev. Clark Oler, Rector of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church, we heard the sound of the generators in the hospital. The generators were at work; the hospital was not without light in the emergency. Built-in generators. Prepared for the emergency. When the moment of crisis came, when the lights went out, the hospital was able to keep on functioning. Careful planning and preparation in advance made this possible.

What about this in reference to your life. Are you seeing to it that your inner life is being nourished properly so that when the time of testing comes you will have what it takes to keep on functioning. Are you seeing to it that the lines of your faith are in good condition, in good connection with the source of all power. Care and discipline should be given to the cultivation of the inner life. Prayer, worship, study, all these help in making strong the inner life. Neglect, indifference, laziness - these weaken the lines of connection with the source of spiritual power.

And finally, remember this: the lights come back on. We believe in a universe where "the lights come back on". The darkness was overcome. O Henry, legend has it, said on his death bed: "Turn up the lights. I'm afraid to go home in the dark". There is one ringing truth the Christian attests to and that is that he does not operate in the darkness, that there is nothing to be afraid of when the lights go out. He goes his way in the assurance of what John, the Evangelist, said back in the first century ~~when he wrote the Gospel of John:~~

"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

LET US PRAY

We thank thee, O God, for the light that shines in the darkness, for the Christ who came into our world, and who uses us to be instruments for his way. As we try to find our way through the dangerous and darkened places of life, through the dark tunnels of everyday existence, open our eyes, our spiritual eyes that we may see that light which the darkness cannot put out and which, if we will let it, will shine in us. In the spirit of Christ we pray. Amen

ANNOUNCEMENTS

I would remind you that tea and coffee will be served in Fellowship Hall following the service, and that all of you are invited to share in these moments of warmth and fellowship that we have together following the service.

Also I would take this moment to extend a word of welcome to the visitors in the congregation. It is our joy to have you with us, and we hope that we may have opportunity to greet you in a more personal way following the service - either at the door or at the coffee hour. We would encourage you to sign one of our guest books before you depart, and hope that you will come and worship with us on other occasions.

The announcements are before you in the bulletin. We ask you to review these on your own before you depart. You will note that the fourth and final session in the adult study group will be held today from 12:30 to 1:15. That the young adults will be meeting tonight in the fourth floor lounge, also that tickets to the annual fair and dinner sponsored by the WSCS are on sale again today.

Next Sunday we shall be receiving new members into the fellowship of our church. "Conversations in Church membership" will be held this evening at 7:30 for those of you who in recent weeks have found a church home with us and would like to strengthen the tie you have with us through membership. Should this be of interest and concern to you, accept this as an invitation to come and share in this evening's program. Also next Sunday - is Thanksgiving Sunday. Again this year, we shall celebrate it as "Dedication Sunday" - the Sunday when our pledges of financial support to the work of the church in 1966 will be received.

And here this morning to offer a statement regarding the 1966 Budget of the church, of the great need that exists, of the importance of your support of it, is the Vice-chairman of the Stewardship and Finance Commission, Mr. Robert Johnson. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to present Mr. Johnson to you.

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Thank you, Mr. Johnson, for this statement, for your kind and gracious and challenging words to us...

Jesus said: "It is more blessed to give than it is to receive".