

"WHERE HAVE ALL THE HEROES GONE?"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
September 10, 1989

## "WHERE HAVE ALL THE HEROES GONE?"

### INTRODUCTION

I came across a story recently that will help to lead into today's message. A certain Eskimo man was taken on an expedition to the North Pole some time back. Later on, as a reward for faithful service, he was brought to this city for a short visit. And he was amazed at what he saw. When he returned to his native village, he told stories of tall buildings that rose into the very face of the sky, and of streetcars which he described as houses that moved along the trail, with people living in them as they moved; of mammoth bridges and artificial lights and all the other dazzling sights and sounds to be seen in this great city.

But his people looked at him coldly and walked away. They began to call him Sagdluk, meaning "The Liar", and this name he carried in shame to his grave. Long before his death his original name was entirely forgotten.

Sometime later another Eskimo named Mitek also visit New York City where he, too, saw many things for the first time that impressed him. Later, upon his return, recalling the tragedy of Sagdluk, he decided that it would not be wise for him to tell the truth.

So he told his people how he paddled a kayak on the banks of a great river, the Hudson, and how, each morning, he hunted ducks, geese and seals in the out of doors, in a vast park area. He told how many of the other natives ran around that open area early in the morning with him. Mitek, in the eyes of his countrymen, was a very honest man. His neighbors treated him with great respect. To them he became something of a folk hero.

History is filled with misunderstood geniuses, tortured artists and unappreciated prophets. Greatness certainly has its price. Society is often unprepared for truth. Ask Galileo. The pioneer - the pathfinder and the innovator - they risk ridicule every time. It is not easy being a hero. Maybe that is why there are so few of them around today.

### DEVELOPMENT

A recent New York Times article asked, "Where Have All the Heroes Gone?" It's a good question.

I think it was back in January of this year that photographers shot some pictures of Princess Diana on the beach in a one-piece pink and black bathing suit. PEOPLE magazine later on reported that the company that makes that particular swimsuit had been flooded with requests for the suit. They estimated that those pictures of Diana increased the sale of that particular bathing suit four-fold. What does this suggest to us.

As someone has put it, we have substituted celebrities for heroes, the lifestyles of the "rich and famous" for epics of the good and courageous.

And perhaps one of the greatest needs we have today is to regain a sense of the heroic. Those of you who are teachers can share in this. Jesse Jackson once said that growing up as a fatherless child in difficult surroundings in a little home in South Carolina had one asset. He went to Sunday School. And there he heard his Sunday School teacher talk with enthusiasm about the great heroes of the Bible. He knew in his little heart that if God could use them in

great ways, God could use Jesse, too. That was the greatest influence, he says, in the kind of man he grew up to be.

Now Chapter Eleven of the Book of Hebrews represents the Bible's Gallery of Heroes. Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David and Samuel as well as many who are unnamed in this chapter but not forgotten. Heroes. Every one of them.

I believe that their story can be our story. For God is still in the business of creating heroes. A young man was listening attentively to the great Boston preacher of one hundred years ago, Phillips Brooks. Brooks was describing the courage of our pioneer American heroes. He was telling about the time when brave explorers traveled into areas that had not been explored. He told of those who risked and sometimes gave their lives as they helped to develop this country. The young man also heard Bishop Brooks tell of those who gave their lives that others might have the freedom to worship God. These stories thrilled this young man and he said to the Bishop,

"I wish I had lived in those far-off days; I think I too could have been a hero..."

And the Bishop replied,

"My boy, every age brings its opportunity, and if you cannot be a hero now, you would not have been a hero then."

God is still in the business of creating heroes. You and I can be heroic if we choose. Who are our heroes and of what stuff are they made?

Two weeks ago today we worshipped in St. Ann's Church in Kennebunkport, or I should say that we tried to worship there, but couldn't get in...we arrived at 10:15 thinking it was an 11 o'clock service and it was too crowded. Our President was there; so, too, was Billy Graham. After the President left, and the crowd thinned out I went over to the door where Billy Graham was still greeting people and had opportunity for a brief conversation.

I had never met him before. I've heard him speak in Madison Square Garden more than once and in Harringay Arena in London yezrs ago, but never had the opportunity to talk with him personally which I did on this occasion. I didn't know what I was going to say. I told him I was a friend of Bill Proctors; that helped. He knew Bill. I told him that he - Billy Graham - was one of my heroes. He smiled and seemed to appreciate that. And he is. I see him as the "elder statesman" of the TV Evangelists, head and shoulders above some of the others whose names I won't mention. It was a spontaneous word I spoke. And then afterwards I thought I should have told him how Marion Busk of this congregation came to our Church as a result of his crusade here in 1957 and has stayed with us. He would have liked hearing that, too. She's a hero of mine.

There are many ingredients, of course, that go to make up a hero. Let me touch on three of them here in the sermon.

#### GREAT COURAGE

First of all, heroes are people of great courage. Two small boys walked into the dentist's office. One of them said bravely, "I want a tooth taken out and I don't want any gas, and I don't want it deadened because we're in a hurry!"

The dentist said, "You're quite a brave young man. Which tooth is it?" The boy turned to his smaller friend and said, "Tommy...show him your tooth."

Remember Scott Jantsen? He was a speedskater in the last Winter Olympics. You won't find his name among the medal winners. Remember how Scott slipped twice and fell in his performances. Still he showed himself to be a young man of great courage. Only hours before he raced out on the ice his sister had died of leukemia. Somehow he managed to bind up his spirit, and lace up his skates and carry the banner of the United States into the speed skating competitions. In the closing ceremony, it was Scott Jantsen who led the procession for our country.

There are still persons of courage in our world. But courage is only apparent in the face of hardship. Most of us tend to prefer comfort to courage. And maybe that's why there are fewer heroes now-a-days.

A friend and colleague by the name of Mark Trotter notes that,

"God gives heroes of the Bible very little comfort. He says you ought to read the stories of the heroes in the Bible, the pilgrims of faith. Surprisingly, God treats them roughly. To the complaining Job, God says, 'Stand up on your feet...like a man...I have something to show you'. To Elijah who is hiding from Jezebel in a cave, God says, 'Get out of here. I have something better for you to do with your life'.

To Moses, hiding on his father-in-law's farm in Midian, not wanting to go back to the dangers of Egypt, complaining that he can't be a leader, God says, 'I don't care if you don't think you're a leader. I'll tell you what to do'. And then to Paul, plagued by some thorn in his flesh for which he was given no answer, just the word, 'Keep on going, and I'll give you strength. My grace is sufficient for you'."

"These are heroes of faith the Bible holds up as our examples. They are the examples of what faith looks like."

Courage is the resource God gives us when we are fighting giants. If we never go out to fight giants, we have no need for courage. Of course, life sometimes sends us giants. A fatal disease, the loss of a loved one. The end of a dream or a career. I think of Roy Campanella who I saw again this Summer in Cooperstown. Sometimes we face giants in the moral arena. Ethics on the job. Faithfulness in the face of temptation or in a time of stress. Some of the most courageous people I have been privileged to know will never make PEOPLE magazine. They are quiet people, modest. But they stand for what is right. They refuse to let go of their faith in times of testing. They hang in there when the going gets tough. In their own quiet ways they are heroic. They are people of great courage.

#### GREAT CHARACTER

In the second place, heroes are people of great character. Let me touch on this ingredient.

Seeing the movie, Indiana Jones in Search of the Holy Grail, (and I don't recommend it), reminded me of the story of Sir Galahad and his search for it. Remember how this gallant knight was described? "His strength was as the strength of ten because his heart was pure". I don't know very many celebrities today who would be described as having a "pure heart". Pete Rose? No. Oral Hershiser? Maybe. Does your hero have a pure heart?

When Detroit's radio station WXYZ was in its hey-day, it was responsible for the creation of three different heroes - the Lone Ranger, the Green Hornet, and King (the dog in Sergeant Preston of the Yukon). As one who grew up listening to the Lone Ranger, I was intrigued by something I came across that said that station manager George Trendel had suggested the main ideas for the creation of each hero and he gave the following orders for designing the character of the Lone Ranger.

"The Lone Ranger always uses perfect English, no accent. Don't ever cast aspersions at any race or religious group. Be fair. Make him serious. Remember, the Lone Ranger never shoots to kill. He is a sober-minded man with a righteous purpose. A former Texas Ranger. He never takes a drink at the bar. He never smokes. Make the kids look up to him. Make him an idol. A hero".

Trendle felt it was important for a hero to be good and righteous. We could only hope for such virtues in the people our children idolize. Perhaps in the absence of such heroes it is more important than ever for Mom and Dad to be persons of character. If the kids can't look to their cultural idols for appropriate rolemodels, maybe they will look to their parents. Heroes are not only persons of great courage but also great character.

#### GREAT CONFIDENCE IN GOD

Most of all, heroes have a great confidence - not in themselves (that's important), but in God. The amazing thing about the men listed in Hebrews Eleven is not how heroic they were but how human, how ordinary, how very much like ourselves. Their courage and their character were not their own. For the writer of Hebrews, they were the essence of what faith is all about.

I like the way Mary Lou Redding put it in the magazine, ALIVE NOW, some-time back. She writes,

"I've grown up in a world of superheroes - Wonder Woman, Superman, Captain Marvel, the Fantastic Four. Ordinary people like me, without super powers or limbs that stretch for miles or the ability to change form - well, they can't be heroes, or can they?

That long list in Hebrews contains a telling phrase, 'They were weak, but became strong'. It seems that strength and super power are not prerequisites to hero-ness. God's heroes are weak people who have simply made themselves available.

Being a hero is not ducking into a phone booth and putting on tights and a flashy costume. It is acknowledging our

weakness and limitations and making all that we have available to God".

That is how God's heroes are born. You and I have the potential for greatness in us because we have a great God. We can all be heroes by faith in Christ. He will give us the courage and the character we need in the time of testing.

CLOSING STORY

Earl Cowden tells this story of a young woman whose name was Linda. She was in a terrible car accident. When the paramedics came upon the scene they found her in shock due to a loss of blood from a severed right leg. She was pinned in the wreckage and it was some time before they could free her and treat the wounds. All the while she remained conscious and alert. They were amazed at her calmness in view of the serious injuries sustained. Just like Briget Gurney here in our own city.

Later on one of the paramedics said to newsmen covering the scene, "I guess the only thing that saved her life was the singing". Puzzled at this revelation, they asked him what she was singing. He replied, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus...all our sins and griefs to bear...what a friend we have in Jesus!" I doubt that Linda thought of herself as being heroic, but perhaps... perhaps she was.

And all of us can be, too....under the right circumstances, just as surely as those magnificent heroes we read about in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews. All it takes is courage, character and confidence in God. Three C's.

PRAYER

"Make us deeply sensitive, O God, to your presence and nearness in these moments here in this sanctuary we call Your house.

We are thankful for the recollection of these great heroes of the faith that we read about in the Bible, and we pray that we may have something of their courage, character and confidence as we go on from here in our time, in our city.

For the race is short, O God, even at its longest... and we would seek to run it well as devoted and committed followers of Christ. In His name and in His spirit we now pray. Amen"

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I. GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We take this moment to greet the visitors with us...as it says in that little doughnut shop up in Maine...."no strangers here...only friends who have not yet met...." And that's the way it is here...
- B. Be free in the sharing of your name. Fill out a visitor card. Sign a Guest Book. Join us downstairs for some refreshments following the service. Come and worship with us again...work with us in our programs of service to others.
- C. This final word. We've been doing the "Lord's Work" at this busy corner of His Kingdom since 1837. We minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit that we greet you.

II. FRIENDS FROM FORMER DAYS

- A. It's always a joy to welcome back some dear friends from former days who have meant a lot to us in previous years... and still do. How grand it is to have Elody Hoelscher with us...all the way from Florida where she now makes her home. From the mid seventies to the mid-eighties, Elody was chairperson of the Board of Trustees and gave us great leadership!

III. SUNDAY SCHOOL

- A. Sunday School resumes today. Classes have been arranged and teachers are being recruited. Be in touch with either Duane or Brenda Thompson about lending a hand in this vital area.

IV. PICK UP YOUR COPY

- A. Be sure to "pick up" your copy of our monthly news sheet. Thanks to Lucy Dinnes for all the work that goes in to writing up our monthly concerns and activities and getting it out to you. Copies are in the usual places.

V. THE FLYER IN THE BULLETIN

- A. Note the flyer describing the Adult Bible Class and the study of a new book. We commend this exciting Bible study opportunity to you. Sundays at 9:30. Coffee. Attendance last Spring ran between 12 and 20 most Sundays.

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VI. THIS WEEK...

- A. A busy week coming up. Note the various meetings that are scheduled for this week. I won't take time to mention them... they're listed there for you....as well as two weekly study opportunities....and remember the choir begins its Fall schedule of weekly rehearsals with more singers needed.

VII. HOME COMING SUNDAY / SEPTEMBER 24

- A. Two weeks from today...marks the beginning of the Fall Season. Time to re-establish your pattern of weekly worship and service. Children will be with us. We shall have a prayer "rededicating" our church home...our sanctuary which, as most know, has been redecorated...restored across the past four months.
- B. I know the Trustees would like to see us reach our Restoration Fund appeal goal of \$40,000 by Homecoming Sunday. It's possible. To date, we have received 135 gifts and pledges totalling some \$35,000. Of those who have responded, about a third are former members no longer with us...and hopefully, with the full support of our resident members and friends we'll create the full miracle of giving that we talked about last April when we launched "If Our Walls Couls Speak" campaign.
- C. I can't wait for the job to be finished...almost is. We still anticipate some floor work where the tile needs to be replaced...linoleum...repair of ten chandeliers...and a new sound system...and tuning of the organ. Washingt windows.
- D. It's taken us about \$150,000 to do it all. It needs to be done every 15 years...we did it in 1974 (15 years ago), and 30 years ago (1959). Each time the congregation grew stronger in the doing of it. Many here today were blessed by the 1974 restoration which was every bit as challenging as this undertaking! Those coing in the next decade will be blessed by what we have done this Summer. So feel good about challenge!

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- A. Let us worship God with our morning offering remembering the words of Jesus, "That it is more blessed to give than to receive".

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- Partial  
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FIRST INTRODUCTION

The week of toil has ended. Our day of rest is at hand. May the rest and the quiet of this hour of worship refresh our inner life. And may it renew in all of us a sense of God's holy and abiding Presence.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

SECOND INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation...a time in which we prepare ourselves expectantly...that the Spirit of the living God may be made real to us in this hour of worship.

In quietness, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

THIRD INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter into a time of silent meditation as we come into the Presence of Him whom our faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

FOURTH INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation. In these moments, let us ponder the pattern our lives have been weaving as we come into the Presence of Him whom our Faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

MEDITATION

We rest our hearts in the Promise of Jesus who said:

"Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of Me, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light".

"Ask, and it will be given you. Seek and you will find. Knock, and it will be open unto you."

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father, but by Me. If you love Me, you will keep my commandments"

"For I tell you...do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat...or drink..nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food? And the body more than raiment."

"But seek ye first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

"For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present...to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature - shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, Our Lord."

"And all things...whatsoever you shall ask in prayer, believing...you shall receive. And as many as touched Him were made whole!"

"Wait on the Lord. Be of good course and He shall strengthen thine heart. For we dwell in the shelter of the Almighty. He is our refuge and our strength."

"We know that in everything, God works together for good with those who love Him!"

"But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint".

"God so love the world that He gave His only Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life".

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases".

"Thou wilt keep Him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee: because he trusteth in thee".

"In the name of Jesus Christ, I share with you the Good News: We are forgiven".

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

O Thou, who hearest prayer, hear our prayers...for others, as well as for ourselves. Touch with healing, O God...Father of us all, those whom we mention in our prayers this hour:

- |                           |                           |                         |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. <u>Eric de Freitas</u> | 2. <u>Frances Ellison</u> | 3. <u>Daisy Herrick</u> |
| 4. _____                  | 5. _____                  | 6. _____                |

...beloved members and friends of this congregation. Comfort the bereaved and the broken hearted among us...and especially be close to Lynn Bruhn who in recent days has lost a loved one. Abide among us as a healing benediction. Heal each of us at the point of our deepest need.

Answer the upspoken prayers now offered to thee on the altars of our hearts, spoken in the name and spirit of Jesus, who taught us to say when we pray.... For we ask all of this in the powerful name and lifting spirit of Jesus who taught us to say when we pray...

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power and the glory, forever. Amen"

PASTORAL PRAYER: September 10, 1989

ETERNAL GOD IN CHRIST, grant us grace to worship Thee in spirit and in truth.

We believe that in these moments of worship the deepest things within us are being stirred up...and that down below the surface of our lives, Your spirit is striving to bring forth the highest and the best that we are meant to be.

Wrestle with us, O God, until we are conquered by Your love.

o [ And grant us such spiritual wealth that we will be made aware of ETERNAL REALITIES...that captured by a vision of the Christ-like life, we will be lifted out of our littleness by our dedication to abiding values and to Your everlasting purpose for us.

CLEANSE US, O GOD...from our evil ways, our ugly egotism, our indifferent apathy, our sinful lusts...that we may be ready for this transforming experience.

GRANT US HONESTY in confronting and confessing our sins.

o [ We do not mean to live...oblivious...to the perplexities and turmoil that surrounds us or the hunger and the tragedies that fill our world.

Forgive us, Lord, for having shunned costly involvement.

We like our relaxation, our comfortable living style, our full stomachs. With our preoccupation with things, we haven't really sensed any great need of You.

We confess that we have been slow to pray...until the odds mounted against us. We have been neglectful of justice and couldn't care less about human rights for others until the oppressed have made a scene and embarrassed us. We have been short on charity until it was legislated for us.

~~Our hypocrisy is self-evident, Lord. We have accepted the Gospel's high demand with our lips but not with our lives.~~

o [ BUT IN SPITE OF OUR HUMANNES, our weaknesses, our self-indulgence, our neglect, YOU dared to entrust Your Kingdom to us. Admittedly, the paradise we have built is organizational and institutional. And we have succeeded in perfecting the market place, but not your Kingdom of Kindness. We have instant communication worldwide, but not the reconciling word for our neighbor.

HEAR, O GOD, our confession of confusion. And by Your Holy Spirit, touch us, and renew within us, each one of us, the heart of grace.

MINISTER TO OUR PERSONAL NEEDS, DEAR FATHER, IN THIS TIME OF WORSHIP.

Walk through this community of great faith now and be the help  
and comfort, the inspiration and sustenance of our souls.

Comfort us in our bereavement. Steady our spirits in sickness.  
Keep our hearts steadfast in practical distress.

In temptation, in illness, in disappointment and depression, in defeat  
when we are tempted to give up....in success when we are tempted  
to be proud and haughty - O God, restore our souls.

May we hear YOUR voice speaking to each of us, reassuring us,  
challenging us, summoning us to great things in days ahead, to  
dedicated and victorious living.

ALL THIS WE NOW PRAY in the name of the Good Shepherd who gently brings us  
HOME to Himself.

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