

# SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

BULLISH ON AMERICA

*"Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened  
that it cannot save, or his ear dull that  
it cannot hear...."* Isaiah 59:1

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*"Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened  
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Whatever else this pulpit may have been since it was dedicated forty-four years ago, it has never been a platform for a Pollyanna faith. To speak more biblically, at no time has it been so faithless as to cry "peace" when there was no peace. It has frequently drawn the wrath of many for refusing to equate the fortunes of the Kingdom of God with the fortunes of America.

My theme today is "Bullish on America." I can only ask you to hear me out should you be tempted to infer from that title that we have lost the faith or gone soft in the head.

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Bullish on America. The term, of course, is a direct steal from Wall Street. Stockbrokers have a way of calling a declining market a bear market and a rising market a bull market. Just how those terms came into use I do not know and have no burning desire to learn. I keep from confusing them in my mind by remembering the term "bear down." A bear market is a down market, and a bull market a market on the rise!

To say that one is bullish on America is to say that one is hopeful about the nation's future. And that is precisely what I want to say today. Move over, Messrs. Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner and Smith. Campbell is bullish on America too!!

\* \* \*

Why so? How so? -- given the mess we are in today. I grant you it is easier these days to be cynical than hopeful. Cynicism is "in" and whatever its opposite

is is out. The cynical Congressman speaks our mind. We laugh with the stand-up comic who rakes over our hypocrisies. We savor the lampooning skits of Broadway. We revel in the clever satire of an Art Buchwald and a Russell Baker.

The leading cause of our cynicism is the growing feeling that everyone these days is "on the take." Those in the highest seats of power have betrayed us. Self-serving pressure groups rather than inflexible principles shape most of our foreign and domestic policy.

Upstairs/Downstairs is the name of a popular television series that is exceedingly well done. It comes to us from Britain commendably crowded with humor, drama and first-rate acting. The setting is Edwardian England. The Upstairs deals with the nobility and their foibles. The Downstairs has to do with the servants who go about the same business of life but with many deprivations. How interesting that the same sins are committed on both levels. But when someone gets pregnant out of wedlock Upstairs, there is the quick trip to Brighton by the Sea. When someone becomes pregnant out of wedlock Downstairs, there is widespread havoc and embarrassment and the eventual loss of a job.

We are cynical because in recent years those of us who live Downstairs have been given insights into what is going on Upstairs. The picture is disquieting - to say the least. There is an old British vaudeville song that runs like this:

"It's true the whole world over;  
It's everywhere the same;  
The rich get all the pleasure,  
And the poor get all the blame."

But even within the Upstairs and the Downstairs we find it hard to believe in each other. Trust has broken down. Our "nay" is not "nay," and our "yea" is not "yea." Promises are made to be broken, contracts to be violated, duties to be neglected at will.

But enough! The last thing we need is for someone to tell why we feel the way we do. It is natural nowadays to be cynical -- and I am cynical myself.

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At this point I want you to clear a place in your mind for a statement by Paul Tillich that gave rise to this sermon. It is taken from his book The Shaking of the Foundations. "If the foundations of this place and all places begin to crumble, cynicism itself crumbles with them. And only two alternatives remain -- despair, which is the certainty of eternal destruction, or faith, which is the certainty of eternal salvation."

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This astute interpreter of life was here telling us that cynicism at its worst can only be a temporary condition. We can't go on unendingly in such a state. The mood cannot be sustained. It is at most an interim attitude that must issue eventually either in despair or faith. I am bullish on America because I believe that our cynicism will lead, in time, to faith.

"Well," you ask, "what indicators do you point to to substantiate your hope?" The Good Humor man is sure that things are looking up when he moves more ice cream. Detroit stirs with hope when auto sales are up. Hotels brim with confidence when occupancy pushes up towards seventy-five or eighty percent. Businessmen smile when interest rates go down. Universities are heartened by Foundation grants and a promising freshman class. Churches are more inclined to sing the Doxology when their budgets are met and their pews filled.

All such indicators fall short. Each can be misleading. In fact, all these signs could be flashing positive while the nation went down-hill. The basic, altogether fundamental ground of hope in any society is its sense of God. I contend that we are moving towards a saving sense of God because, at last, we are beginning to ask the right questions!

One question that we are asking in a thousand dif-

ferent ways is this: "Where have we gone wrong?" Much of our suffering is a result of our transgressions -- and we know it. A gentleman came over to me in our cafeteria the other day and said that he had spotted a new line of graffiti downtown that read as follows: "God is back and He sure is mad." Actually, He's never been away! We took a holiday from Him! Yet the inkling is there that we have betrayed a trust. Where have we gone wrong?

Consider the words with which our newspapers are filled these days: guilt, pardon, forgiveness, amnesty, mercy, judgment, truth, right, wrong, healing, reconciliation. These words belong to the language of religion. Such language carries us back behind sociological data, psychoanalytical descriptions, biomedical interpretations of life, political and economic analyses -- behind and beneath all these to God, the one with whom we have to do. Yes, and the one with whom we know we have to do!

This language points to a moral framework. It reacquaints us with the forgotten category of sin. One of our ushers said to me the other night, "I wish the government would get its foot off my neck, its hand out of my pocket, its eyes off my private life and stop interfering with me!" Have you never had those feelings yourself? Why is it that life has become so encumbered with complex procedures and regulations? Why can't we be freer than we are?

One of the reasons why life has become complicated for us is our sin. For example, the reason why we must write our checks on tamper-proof paper is because some of us are forgers. The reason why that insurance company required seven copies of your grandfather's death certificate before it paid off is because some of us are swindlers. The reason why landlords want a month's rent in advance is because some of us might skip out. The reason why IRS has an auditing department is because some of us are crooked in our arithmetic. The reason why meat must be inspected and graded is because some growers and producers would deceive us. The reason why the contents of a can of food must be

marked clearly on the outside is because some manufacturers would put in one thing and sell it for another. Over the years these regulations have mounted. The enemy is not bureaucracy. The enemy is the sin in human nature that must be checked.

Where have we gone wrong? The "we" is critical. Back in the 50's and 60's one group would go off by itself and ask, "Where have you gone wrong?" But now I catch (perhaps because I want to catch) a different note. Together we are asking, "Where have we gone wrong?"

There is no such thing, is there, as righteous indignation. That is a flattering term that we like to apply to ourselves. All human indignation is unrighteous. Our best protestations are speckled with self-interest and marred by personal or class bias. When Harold Bosley preached his final sermon at Christ Church Methodist last summer he made this statement: "I believe in God as good, and God only as good. I believe in God as perfect, and God only as perfect." Where have we gone wrong?

I sense a mood in the nation to forgive, to heal, to pardon. We were denied a magnificent opportunity to express forgiveness by the former president's intransigence and his successor's premature pardon. A noble urge was aborted. Even those who were furthest from the president politically were listening for the needed word of contrition so that they might extend mercy. We are all in this together. The question is not where he went wrong or they, but WE.

The other question that I hear as a harbinger of hope is this: What kind of people do we wish to be? Another way of asking it is, "What kind of ideals do we hold up for ourselves?" Do we really want an every-man-for-himself, every-woman-for-herself society? A famous entertainer walked into an automobile showroom recently and bought, on the spot, five Lincoln Continentals -- each a different color. Is that what we wish to lionize and support?

Do we want to see New York State build three domed sports stadia in the next ten years, or would we rather see a bond issue floated for the mentally ill, the poor, the elderly? Do we want to perpetrate an order that pays its athletes in six figures, but underpays its teachers and nurses? Do we want to go on with a national budget that makes a fetish out of military hardware and under-treats the hurts and pains of the needy? It is only a beginning, but we are at least asking the question, "What do we really want ourselves to be?"

Kenneth Wilson, a friend of mine who writes consistently perceptive editorials for "The Christian Herald," reported recently that Christian people in some quarters were being overtured to send away for a year's "survival assortment" of food. The items were processed for long-term storage. The ad said, "Things may get lean and there may be scarcity around. Be sure that you and your family are cared for."

Is that what we want, a chance to maintain ourselves? Mr. Wilson's comments were on the mark: "Such a scare tactic is, I think, notably un-American. Hoarding anything induces scarcity even if none existed to begin with. More than that, I think the tactic is notably un-Christian. If you as a Christian can keep your groceries while all about are losing theirs, there's something wrong with your Christianity. Who could live for long in a house of plenty on a street of want, and who would wish to do so? How can we even now comfortably live in a country of plenty in a world of want? How can we sleep -- not because of wondering what we will eat tomorrow, but because of knowing there are hundreds of thousands who did not eat today?" 2

What kind of people do we wish to be? Do we want our cities to continue their downward trend? Do we want to neglect them in our State and National budgets? People in Boston are going to have to ask themselves, whatever they think about race, "Do we want a city permanently torn up by unresolved tension?" It may be the case that cities up and down the land for less than perfect reasons will decide on pragmatic grounds that



once and for all they had better stop the nonsense and let everybody in! I think of the neighbor Jesus told about who got up in the middle of the night to give three loaves to a friend -- not because he cared, but because the knocking on the door annoyed him!

What kind of people do we want to be? Do we want to go on refereeing all the international problems of the world. Infiltrating Chile and Vietnam and other places? Do we want to continue trying to dominate people by the threat of withheld generosity? How strange that for years through the threat of withheld credit, withheld manufacturing know-how, withheld "favored nation" status, we were able, like a lion tamer, to stand inside the cage with the bullwhip in our hand and exercise dominion.

Then it happened. One night while we slept a Sheik from Arabie replaced us on the stool, snatched the bullwhip from our hand and with oil as his convincer made the other nations sit up and mind. Then we had the temerity to question the morality of such domination!!

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Where have we gone wrong? What kind of people do we wish to be? These are hopeful signs because such questions will help us to reconnect with God! The Bible can't do anything for us while we are obsessed with the Gross National Product. The Bible has not much to say to us if we are only trying to groom our families to be winners in the great American game of show and tell. But once we start asking, "Where have we gone wrong?" and "What kind of people do we wish to be?" the entire Bible opens up and we discover the pull and power of Isaiah's words when he said, "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save, or his ear dull that it cannot hear...."

The problem has never been on God's side: It has always been on ours. God is ready when we are. That's what Isaiah was saying. Does God have arms? - No. Does God have ears? - No. Then Isaiah was a fool? -

No. Not quite! George Adam Smith tells us what those words mean. "Conceive what inspired them. The great truth that in the infinite there is a heart to throb for men and women and a will to strike for them. There is One, however hidden, who feels for us, who feels hotly for us, whose will is quick and urgent to save us." 3 There is our hope. By the right questions we put ourselves in a "save-able" position before God. There in the exile as they thought again about their iniquities and their future, the Israelites were assured that God had an arm that could reach and an ear that could hear.

Tillich was right. We cannot go on living in cynicism. Two alternatives are before us: Despair, which is the certainty of eternal destruction, or faith, which is the certainty of eternal salvation.

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But a nation is no stronger than the people who comprise it -- people like you and me. Before I close I invite you to personalize our two questions: Not "Where have we gone wrong?" but "Where have I gone wrong?" Not "What kind of people do we wish to be?" but "What kind of person do I wish to be?" There is a balm in Gilead. No reason to stay ill. The arm of the Lord is not short nor his ear dull.

I have written down seven statements that sum up my understanding of commitment and state my intentions. I want you to repeat each statement after me insofar as it speaks your personal convictions:

1. God is alive and present in the world.
2. All life, including mine, is a trust from God.
3. God has addressed me and saved me in his Son Jesus Christ.
4. Jesus' vision of the Kingdom is the noblest view of history that I know.
5. I have a duty to resist the wrong and encourage the right.
6. Filled with God's spirit, my life can make a difference in the world.

7. I ask God to help me make that difference.

#### CLOSING PRAYER

*Gracious Father, open the shutters of our souls  
that the light of Thy presence may come  
shining in.*

*Use the unrest that has grasped us as a people  
to move us on to Thee,*

*And help us to keep the promises we make*

*- to ourselves*

*- to others*

*- to Thee*

*for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

#### FOOTNOTES:

1. Tillich, Paul, The Shaking of the Foundations, p. 10, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1948
2. Wilson, Kenneth, "The Christian Herald" Magazine, November, 1974
3. Smith, George Adam, The Expositor's Bible, p. 835, Vol. 3, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1943

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