

# SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

"GOD'S REMNANT - MAN'S HOPE"

*"If the Lord of Hosts had not left us a remnant, we should soon have been like Sodom, no better than Gomorrah."*


*(Isaiah 1:9)*

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*(Isai'ah 1:9)*

Back in August of 1969 a Conference on Liturgics was held in the city of Milwaukee. Several hundred delegates were involved. At a set time on the program the participants were given an unusual assignment. They were to go out singly into the streets of the host city, look for signs of hope and report back.

The idea behind that assignment intrigues me. I keep wondering what I might have come up with. Where would I have looked for signs of hope? Would I know the face of hope if I met it head on?

\* \* \* \*

The prophets of the Old Testament had a way of living out of phase with their contemporaries. They flashed danger signals in times of seeming prosperity. They found reasons to rejoice when the rest of the nation was engulfed in despair.

These men thrived on countering popular judgment. They were not likely to "Amen" the optimism of the Chamber of Commerce, or to be found at the wailing wall when some war was lost, or some cleverly contrived bit of statecraft backfired.

Actually, the prophets gave the appearance of having come from another country. And indeed they had! They marched to a different drum beat. They read events through the corrective lenses of a sturdy faith. It shouldn't surprise that they would grieve when others laughed, or laugh when others grieved.

\* \* \* \*

Look at Isaiah! Called by R.B.Y. Scott "an aristocrat of the spirit." Hailed by T.C. Vriezen as "the greatest prophet in the period of the kings." A soul obviously dear to the heart of George Friedrich Handel.

There in the eighth century BC, Israel was in a bad way. The Assyrians had over-powered them from without in a variety of assaults. From within they sagged beneath the purposes of God because of "pride, fullness of bread, prosperous ease, and a failure to help the poor and needy." (Ezek 16:49)

Isaiah's response was one of realism and hope. The realism was acute almost to the point of pain. "If the Lord of Hosts had not left us a remnant, we should soon have been like Sodom, no better than Gomorrah." Israel for all of its ritualized worship, for all of its possession of the Torah, for all of its illustrious history as the people of God could have been as the debauched and destroyed cities of the plain Sodom and Gomorrah.

But hope blazed with the brilliance of a thousand rising suns. God had preserved through it all a saving remnant. "If the Lord of Hosts had not left us a remnant, we should soon have been like Sodom, no better than Gomorrah."

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Had we been turned loose in Milwaukee that day with notebook in hand looking for signs of hope, the mood of the country being what it is, many, if not most of us, would have returned with all the pages blank! The time is ripe for a few remarks about the nature of Biblical hope.

Biblical hope dares to believe that God is at work in history. Mark you, Israel's woes and Israel's seasons of prosperity could always be explained by "natural causes;" good crops, successful wars, wise kings, beneficial treaties; or blight, earthquakes, foolish diplomacy, tactical military blunders. But always the

prophet taught the relevance of another dimension! He kept pointing to fidelity to the covenant, dedication of self, love of neighbor, justice at the gate.

It is our insensitivity to this dimension of life as Christians that contributes greatly to our despair. After the economist has talked about balance of trade deficits, tight money and inflation control; after the political scientist has assessed the latest actions of the mayor, the governor and the president; after the sociologist has analyzed the flight to suburbia and the most recent approach to urban renewal; after students of diplomacy have explained foreign policy, or the lack of it, and weighed the most recent decisions of the United Nations; after all of these have spoken, the prophet must still be heard from.

The prophet is the man who refuses to let us get away with a "flat-earth" view of history. It is the prophet who stresses the moral factor in our problems, who introduces such terms as greed and justice, selfishness and love, exploitation and sharing. It is the prophet who keeps vividly alive before us the almost forgotten categories of repentance and faith, sin and forgiveness, death and re-birth. To refuse to hear the prophets is to refuse to hear our problems spoken of in moral terms.

Anything that breaks these realities open and makes these prophetic categories part of our understanding of life is hopeful, however painful the process. The saga that is being written these days at Forest Hills is a case in point. A community that has been long famous for its tennis facilities is now making a tennis ball out of the poor. For a while the housing issue there was discussed in antiseptic, objective terms. Presently questions of the heart and attitudes of the spirit began to surface. It is a hopeful sign that hostilities are now out and on the table.

To the man of Forest Hills who says "I worked all my life for this house," the prophet can only answer "That's where you made your mistake. You should have

worked your whole life to understand and live out the purposes of God. Damn your house! Up with people! As it goes with the poor among you, so it will go with you."

We happen to be living in an age when many bills have fallen due. This is why many of us feel so hopeless and despairing. The black man is presenting his bill. The Indian is presenting his bill. The Hispano-American is presenting his bill. The nations of the Third World are presenting their bill. I suggest that it is far more hopeful for those of us who believe in a moral universe that these bills are being presented than would be the case if we were living in tranquility with all of these injustices buried deep.

Every prophet is a prophet of woe and a prophet of salvation. The difference between the false prophet and the true is that the false prophet looks upon salvation as an unchanging property of Israel. Israel could rest assured of its salvation. The true prophet recognizes that salvation depends on God alone. That it is granted by God only to those who have remained faithful to the covenant, or who having been unfaithful have passed through judgment first. "If the Lord of Hosts had not left us a remnant, we should soon have been like Sodom, no better than Gomorrah."

Biblical hope also understands the "remnant strategy" of God. What is the remnant strategy? It is Gideon going off to war against the Midianites with 32,000 men and finally getting the job done with 300. The remnant strategy is Noah and his family precariously carrying the covenant line into a new world. The remnant strategy is Abraham going out alone with the hopes and fears of oncoming generations on his shoulders. The remnant strategy is Moses as the only surviving male child being guarded by the providence of God in order that he might lead his people out. The remnant strategy is a whole wilderness generation dying in the wilderness, save for Caleb and Joshua who maintained the vision and went over into Canaan.

The remnant strategy is a whole nation called but found wanting so that eventually only in the line of David can we look for Messiah.

A distinguished New Testament theologian has suggested that since the new has come, we are no longer living under this remnant strategy. G. Henton Davies writes: "The very paucity of references to the remnant in the New Testament shows that the resurrection has put the remnant into reverse. Henceforth it is the destiny of the Christian remnant not to dwindle but to expand, though, of course, the warning in Matthew 7:13, 14 should not be forgotten." 1 That's a big, "of course," for those words of our Lord in Matthew tell us that the "gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life and those who find it are few."

I'm not sure that we have finished with the remnant strategy. "Not many wise men, not many mighty, not many noble are called." (I Cor. 1:26) I can remember Jesus saying to his disciples, "When the Son of man returns, will he find faith on the earth?" (Lk 18: 8) Or, again, one hears him speaking to his own, "Fear not, little flock, it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. (Lk 12:32)

I referred last week to a study made by Thomas Campbell and Yoshio Fukuyama. Let me quote from it again today. "If more than 95% of the American people consider themselves to be religious men, (and they do by polls) and if in fact well over half of the people are members in good standing of religious bodies, then who would expect that religious men or church members in general would differ significantly on any issue from the American population at large." 2 The authors go on to note that "we have set membership standards so low that now the majority belongs to the church. This, by definition, means that we are essentially a cultural church." 3

When one looks at ecclesiastical statistics he becomes hopeful. What could not these Christians do if only they put their minds and hearts and money behind

it. Let the prophets remind us that despite our impressive statistics there is but a small remnant that is sensitive to the moving of the Spirit and following the voice of the Lord.

The Europeans never have been quite so taken up with numbers as we have in this country. But somebody must have gotten to Karl Barth one day for he sat down and wrote: "It is comforting to think that the good God likes to be on the side of the big battalions, so that we have only to look to these to find traces of the true Church. Certainly great membership rolls and good attendance and full churches and halls (and even lecture rooms) are facts which naturally impress us-who can fail to be impressed by them. But what do they really have to do with the truth?" 4

Always we live with the visible church and the invisible essence. Popular religious faith has been sold in this country as a device for getting on in the world. If we subscribed with that in mind it is not likely that we will have the mind of Christ on the issues of the day. The transmission of the vision is always a precarious business, always a fragile undertaking. It can be as fragile as a mother bending o'er her child in a drafty stable.

If the world only knew what it owes to a loyal few it would say to the remnant what Jacob said to Laban, "I have learned by experience that the Lord hath blessed me for thy sake." (Gen. 30:27)

Finally, Biblical hope is always held in humility. One can never presume to be part of the remnant.

We used to sing some years ago:

"Who is on the Lord's side?  
Who will serve the king?  
Who will be his helper  
Other lives to bring?"

Towards the end the chorus would come to a rousing



crescendo, and we would sing lustily:

"We are on the Lord's side,  
Saviour, we are thine." 5

I suppose there is room for "pep rally" music in the ranks, but that is a dangerous way to sing or think or believe. Jesus had much to say about those who called him Lord, but did not what he asked. Which would you prefer, those who say and do not, or those who say not and do? The presumptuous are always sure that they were unfailing in fulfillment of their duty. When did we see thee hungry and feed thee not, or in prison and visit thee not? But members of the remnant are always surprised to be included. When did we see thee hungry and give thee meat, or thirsty and give thee drink?

The remnant is only discernible in retrospect. Even Isaiah didn't claim that he was part of it. He could look back and see that had it not been for the remnant even Israel would have been as Sodom and Gomorrah. Hence, of the remnant, I cannot say, "Lo, here" as though I were part of it, or "Lo, there" as though you were part of it. I do not know. At the very least this humility saves us from the irritating trait of premature rightness.

About all we know is that the remnant is turned loose in the world. It is not all monasteried up on the side of some mountain. It is the very purpose of the remnant to mix and permeate.

"Lo, the prince of common welfare  
dwells within the market strife;  
Lo, the bread of heaven is broken  
in the Sacrament of life." 6

I don't know where the remnant is today, but I know it's there. I would suggest that you are nearing the presence of the remnant wherever a commitment to purity subdues lust; wherever the power to forgive triumphs over vengeance; wherever a willingness to

share defeats the urge to keep; wherever restraint gets the upper hand on license; wherever others matter more than self; wherever the verb "to be" towers over the very "to have;" wherever doubt gives way to trust or fear to faith.

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A cynical reviewer of movies began his review of a deplorable film with these words: "I viewed it from a disadvantageous position, I was facing the screen." In the church today many are just that cynical about life. The pity is that we have to look at it, and live it. Isaiah's text is for you: "If the Lord of Hosts had not left us a remnant, we should soon have been like Sodom, no better than Gomorrah." God acts in history. That is hopeful. God always has his remnant. That is hopeful. Purpose in your heart to belong to it.

#### CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, we believe; help thou our unbelief.  
Teach us to look for Thee in quiet places  
    off camera,  
and in common people, unheralded  
    whose lives reflect Thy splendor.

In an age of instant cures  
    and crushing disappointments,  
give us confidence in Thy long-range  
    purposes,  
and Thy power to prevail.  
    Through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Davies, G. Henton, A Theological Word Book of the Bible, p. 191, Macmillan Paperbacks, 1950
2. Campbell, Thomas and Fukuyama, Yoshio, The Fragmented Layman, p. 217, Pilgrim Press, Philadelphia, 1970
3. Ibid, p. 217
4. Barth, Karl, Church Dogmatics, p. 709, Vol. IV, Part I, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1956
5. Havergal, Frances R., hymn 308, Hymns for the Living Age, The Century Co., New York, 1923
6. Dearmer, Geoffrey, hymn 403, Pilgrim Hymnal, The Pilgrim Press, Boston, 1931

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