

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

■ SO THE KING CARES AFTER ALL

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had sackcloth within upon his flesh."


II Kings 6:30b

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One would be justified in expecting that a minister of the gospel on the Sunday after Christmas would take his people post-haste to the City of Bethlehem at the time of the birth of Christ. It is my intention to get there today but not to start there. I want to start at Samaria, thirty-five miles north of Bethlehem at a time some eight hundred years earlier.

I want to begin with a story out of the Elisha Cycle. It's a story that has to do with a siege of the city of Samaria, the capital city of the Northern Kingdom, Israel. The principles in the drama? First Ben Haddad, the ruthless warrior-king of Syria, and then Jehoahaz, the king of Israel.

The siege that Ben Haddad set up was painfully effective. Slowly but surely the population was reduced to starvation. Normal human beings, overcome by desperation, resorted to the tactics of hungry animals. The jungle after all is not so much behind us as beneath.

Two women who remain anonymous in the story made a rather ghoulish agreement: "Give your son, that we may eat him today," said one, "and we will eat my son tomorrow." (II Kings 6:28) One mother fulfilled her part of the pact, but the other understandably reneged. The woman who had given up her son in good faith sought justice at the hand of the king. She saw him as he walked the wall that encircled the city like a giant belt. The king doubtless walked that wall each day to survey the situation and communicate courage to the hearts of his countrymen. He was somewhat indignant that the woman would seek him out. "If the Lord will not help you, whence shall I help you? From the threshing floor, or from the wine press?" (II Kings 6:27) he asked sarcastically.

Presently, however, he discovered that the woman's concern was not for something to eat but rather for justice. She wanted her case adjudicated. When she told of the agreement she had made, the horror of it all, the unspeakable savagery that it reflected, got to the king. We are told that he rent his clothes -- just as Jacob had rent his clothes when he thought that Joseph was dead. Just as David had rent his clothes at the death of Saul. He put sackcloth on against his flesh, a coarse cloth signifying grief, mourning and penitence. Next morning he was out walking the wall as usual. The record says, "and he passed by upon the wall, and the people looked, and behold, he had sackcloth within upon his flesh." (II Kings 6:30b)

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There is reminder here that outward appearances can deceive. The king wore his brightest robes no doubt as the days grew darker, trying to fire up the faith of his people and keep them keeping on. But beneath that bright exterior there was inner sadness.

Moreover, there is reminder here of the weight men carry who bear the rule of office. We who are ruled are more numerous than those who rule. Hence, we tend to be sympathetic toward each other and cynical toward those who lead us. It has become fashionable in these times to vilify people in public service. In mercy we ought to remember how "uneasy lies the head that wears a crown." In a time like ours when indiscretions have obviously been committed by some who hold high office in the land we ought to be on guard against such sweeping condemnations as would keep us from recognizing the numbers of people, and there are many, who are in public life because of a desire to serve. It becomes us as members of the body of Christ to listen to the exhortation of Scripture and pray for those who have the rule over us.

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But the key point for me is that the event we scrutinize today gave the people of Israel a new understanding of

their king. It made them revise their estimate of Jehoahaz. He isn't really above it all, is he? He suffers with us, doesn't he? The king really cares after all.

We can be sure that this word traveled fast and wide. The king's reign henceforth would be appraised in the new light of what they had discovered him to be in that crisis. "And he passed by upon the wall, the people looked, and behold, he had sackcloth within upon his flesh." (II Kings 6:30b)

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Now let's come forward those eight hundred years, and south those thirty-five miles and see what all of this has to do with Christmas. It's rather obvious isn't it, that just as the sight of sackcloth gave the people of Israel a critical insight into the nature of their monarch, so what began at Christmas has given us a crucial and critical insight into the nature of God. This is why we rejoice. This why the Christian year begins with Advent. For while the story of Bethlehem unfolds on the plane of history it has a meaning that goes beyond history.

Because Jesus' coming happened within time -- it must submit to all the tests and examinations of the historical. It must be open to investigation regarding places, dates, times and sources. Because this event took place within history there are bound to be incidental aspects of the story that beg for our attention: The idealism of the wise men, the devotion to duty of the shepherds, the humility of Mary and Joseph, the preoccupation of the guests in the inn, the petulant madness of Herod.

But we sadly miss the magnitude and scope of Christmas unless we see that this event was meant to give us a new understanding of God. It is what Richard Niebuhr has called a "revelatory event." I find him helpful when he says, "Sometimes when we read a difficult book, seeking to follow a complicated argument, we come across a luminous sentence from which we can go forward and backward and so attain some understanding of the whole. Revelation is like that. The special occasion to which we appeal in the Chris-

tian church is called Jesus Christ, in whom we see the righteousness of God, his power and wisdom. But from that special occasion we also derive the concepts which make possible the elucidation of all the events in our history. Revelation means this intelligible event which makes all other events intelligible." 1 "The King Cares After All" -- despite our misgivings, despite the presence of radical evil in the world. And he has always cared. It's just that his love and care came to fullest visibility with the coming of the Christ.

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In an age that has more problems than the Mormon Tabernacle Choir has fingers we keep looking for crash programs and catch slogans that will take us where we wish to be. But what we need to rally our weary hearts as we head into a new decade is not, in the first instance, an action program, but a truth -- the truth that God Almighty cares. We have often heard it preached that faith without works is dead. It's time for us to recognize that works without faith are equally dead. The truth that God Almighty cares backstops our involvement in history and gives meaning to the causes into which we pour our energies.

Our view of ultimate reality has sharp bearing on what we make of life. It helps to condition, inform, motivate and sustain our activity in the world. Atheism is an option rarely exercised. Perhaps this is why the Bible says very little about atheism. But the Scriptures have a lot to say about idolatry. They are concerned that we think of God correctly.

The question of our time is not whether God is, but what God is. This is what John Hadham gets at when he says, "What interests me is not whether He exists, but assuming He exists, what he is like and what on earth is He up to at the present moment. I mean 'what on earth' literally. Of the home life of God I know nothing and I am equally ignorant of his relations with other planets and universes. But I am concerned with this world in which I happen to live, and I consider it important to have as clear a picture as pos-

sible of the person who made it, and, what is more difficult to explain, did it on purpose, and is quite satisfied with how it is going on." 2

"In all their affliction he was afflicted," said Isaiah, "and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old." (Isaiah 63:9) God Almighty cares!

Believing this is a generative experience. Love does not dead-end. It always leads to something. We cannot say that God Almighty cares and go on living in the same old way. This truth is not a fact of knowledge that one can store in his mind for retrieval at a later date, the way he might bank the information that there are fifty states in the union, or that Sacramento is the capital of California. To believe that God Almighty cares calls for an alteration of a man's stance toward life and a revision of his relationships with other people.

We suffer in this country from a crisis in motivation. There are programs and agencies enough. What we lack is the ability to motivate an involvement of the human family in the problems that concern us all. Simone de Beauvoir in The Ethics of Ambiguity, relates that "Someone told a young invalid who wept because she had to leave her home, her occupations, and her whole past life, 'Get cured. The rest has no importance.' 'But if nothing has any importance,' she answered, 'what good is it to get cured?'"

The attitude that one senses in this city and to a lesser degree around the nation at large is caught up in the question "Why bother?" The Urban Coalition keeps telling us to "Give a damn." I appreciate their reminders that meet me in subway trains and buses and other places. The Urban Coalition will even tell me how to "Give a damn." But the Urban Coalition does not tell me why to "Give a damn." And that's our problem. Why bother? Because God bothers with us!

When we begin to express the kind of caring for others that God has shown toward us, others are helped

to believe in his love and power. The point of contact between the love of God and what other people think of God is how those of us who believe in him behave. The point of contact is not something a choir sings, or something a minister says, or something a theologian writes. The point of contact in most cases is how they live who say they love him.

I heard this years ago, but it has stayed with me as a major reference point of life. Some American tourists were "doing" Europe after World War II. They went from one place to another with cameras over their shoulders, light luggage in hand, and passports and other papers jammed into crowded pockets. They decided to visit a refugee camp since this too was part of history. What they saw depressed them -- people shuffling about who had lost their identity, some of them sad, some of them bitter, all of them hard up. But they were taken by the lonely figure of a chaplain who made it his business to minister to these people for something like seventeen hours a day, seven days a week. They got this man of God to one side and asked him "Why? Why put out so much for such broken and often unappreciative people?" His reply has stuck: "I want them to know that they matter to God because they matter to me." That family on welfare -- allowed 28¢ per person per meal; that youngster in one of our over-crowded detention homes; that child waiting for adoption; that elderly man bent double by arthritis, bitter and alone; that alcoholic drifting further and further away from reality and losing self-respect, I want them to know that they matter to God because they matter to me.

When we begin to care something inevitably comes to life in them. Recently I came upon a study that deserves wider attention, a little experiment in education on the West Coast called the Rosenthal Study. "The study was said to have identified some unusual black children. Teachers were told about these unusual children in their classroom, and were led to believe that they were exceptional. In the following year these children were tested, and significant gains were indicated. Of course, it was a hoax because they weren't unusual at all. They were just normal black children. The Rosenthal Study in San Francisco proved that if

the expectancy was high the achievement followed." 4

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"And he passed by upon the wall, and the people looked, and behold, he had sackcloth within upon his flesh." (II Kings 6:30b) Every Christmas some line from a song or hymn or anthem sings its way into my consciousness. I find myself humming it or singing it over and over again. (This would be a good opportunity to thank Mr. Swann and our choir for all that they did through music to make the Christ more real to us this season). This Christmas the line that found me was from the third stanza of the version of "Adeste Fideles" which is found in the Pilgrim Hymnal. "Who would not love thee, loving us so dearly?" 5
We are never more like God than when we love. And we are never more useful to the world around us than when we express our love for God in the way we treat our fellows.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, for the light that reaches us
from Bethlehem and Galilee
and Golgatha we do bless Thy name.

Help us, despite the odds, to
believe that Thou art good,
that Thou dost care.

Being loved of Thee
teach us to love and serve
each other after the manner
of the Christ.

In His Name we pray.

Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Niebuhr, H. Richard, The Meaning of Revelation, p. 93, Macmillan Co., N. Y. 1962
2. Hadham, John, Good God, A Study of His Character and Activity, quoted in God and Evil, by Joad, C. E. M., p. 54, Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1942
3. deBeauvoir, Simone, The Ethics of Ambiguity, p. 106 The Citadel Press, 1954
4. Sullivan, Neil V., "Should Public Education Continue?" The Journal, November, 1969
5. Hymn #132, "O Come, All Ye Faithful," Pilgrim Hymnal, The Pilgrim Press, Boston

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