

When God Says, “Baloney!”

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Exodus 4:10-17; Isaiah 6:1-8

It was some twenty-four centuries ago, almost five centuries before Jesus was born, that the Athenian and Persian armies met to do battle. Persia, with its massive military force was set to invade Greece whose armies paled in comparison. The world knew that the Athenians did not stand a chance against the Persian juggernaut. And yet, instead of surrendering the Athenians mustered their force and met the Persians head on. They went to battle on the plain of Marathon. And in a single afternoon the Athenian army did what no one in the world expected them to do --- they defeated the invading Persians. They repulsed them ... sent them into retreat. An incredible victory.

Now as legend goes the general of the Athenian army commissioned a soldier name Pheidippides to run back to Athens to tell them this incredible news. The message he was to deliver was one word “Victory”. Victory was all he needed to say. Now the distance from Marathon to Athens was twenty-five miles and so entrusted with this one word message --- Pheidippides ran. He ran the entire twenty-five miles to bring news of the victory. And as the story goes, when Pheidippides arrived in Athens after running twenty five miles he stood and shouted out that one word message --- “Victory” and then collapsed and died.

Hardly a weekend goes by in this country where there is not somewhere in this land a group of thin-bodied, half crazy people gathered at a starting line waiting to hear the sound of the gun that releases them to begin a race that has been named in honor of this legend of Pheidippides. The run from Marathon. Count on it --- someone right now

is running a marathon --- 26 miles and 385 yards. Twenty five thousand people alone run the New York City marathon. Now of those who choose to run a marathon there are some who are there to win the race. Some are there just to finish the race. Some are there just to survive the race. But you can pretty much count on the fact that no one is there to deliver a message. That’s not the purpose of the modern marathon. The purpose of the modern marathon is to run, to run for the sake of running. To run but with no word to say.

I suppose it would be safe to say that your life and mine can sometimes be compared to the exhausting race of a marathon. Most of our days we run from here to there and from there to here --- and at the end of it all we fall exhausted onto the couch or into the bed --- thinking back and tracing our steps wondering how we could have done so much in such a little space of time. And if you link those kinds of days together and stretch them out over a lifetime then the truth is you and I are not just running a marathon --- we are running to the corners of the world --- or at least that’s how it may feel sometime. But the question is at the end of it all, or in the midst of it all ... as we are running to and fro ... do we have anything to say? Do we have a message to deliver ... a word to offer? As we stand there panting and exhausted, do we have a word for the world?

“Busy” is the catchword for the 21st century. That’s the word I hear everybody using. “Busy”. It may be as much as we have to say for ourselves. We’re busy. How many times have I talked to people and the exchange goes something like this: “Hey, so how you doing?” “Oh, I am so busy.” “Oh really, so what’s you been up to?” “Oh, nothing.”

Busy doing nothing. It explains then the further conversations I have people when they come into my office and say something like, “You know, Steve, I look at my calendar and it’s crammed full of this and that .. and I’m running all over the place and I hardly have time to catch my breath ... I’m doing so much

... I’m running so fast ... but I don’t know what it’s for. And I feel empty inside. I feel sometimes like one of those gerbils on one of those wheels ... running and running and running ... but what for?” Have you heard yourself say that?

So many are running but with little to say.

But you know, as soon as I say that, I’m not sure it’s true. It’s true that we’re running. True that we may not be saying much. But it’s not that we don’t have

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anything to say. Heaven’s sake – we gather here on Sunday mornings and we sing our songs, and pray our prayers, and recite our faith and preach our gospel – oh, we have lots to say on a Sunday morning – but then we hit the pavement and we run and all of a sudden we’re tongue-tied. We get to Athens and we get can’t the word out.

Like the old joke – what do you get when you cross a Jehovah’s Witness with a Presbyterian? You get a guy on your doorstep who doesn’t know what to say.

So Moses has got himself a little marathon. Settled into his little wilderness home in the Sinai, Moses gets the call to go back to Egypt and deliver the Israelites from their cruel bondage to slavery. God says to Moses, go tell Pharaoh, “Let my people go!” Moses has got the marathon, he’s got the word – but then he tells God he’s tongue-tied. He doesn’t speak

very well. He can’t quite get the words out the way he wants to. And with this handicap he’s hoping God will let him off the hook. Let somebody else say what needs to be said, O Lord. Because I don’t have what it takes. And God says, “Baloney”. I hate it when God says, Baloney. Has God ever said Baloney to you? God is saying Baloney to me all the time. All those times when I have some sort of excuse as to why I should not be the one to do the right thing, or say the right thing, or be the right person. I don’t

have what it takes, Lord! And God says, Baloney. I hate it when God says, Baloney.

Because you know when God says Baloney – what it means is that I have to find some way to do some soul searching, some soul digging – to come up with a way to do what needs to be done, say what needs to be said, and be what person I need to be. And this is the great adventure of life. When God does not let us off the hook and instead pushes us in the midst of our marathon to do the work of saying what needs to be said.

Some of you have seen the movie, *The King’s Speech*, which captures the difficult times of King George VI of England who had the throne thrust upon him through the abdication of his brother. King George never wanted the throne due not in small part to the fact that he couldn’t speak well. He had a terrible stutter. How can you be a King when you

can't speak the way you wish? And so when Hitler invaded Poland and the British felt no choice but to declare war it was left to the stuttering king to speak to his subjects. Circumstances would not let him off the hook. A word needed to be said. King George put himself before the microphones and said what needed to be said:

It is to this high purpose that I now call my people at home, and my peoples across the seas, who will make our cause their own. I ask them to stand calm and firm and united in this time of trial. The task will be hard. There may be dark days ahead, and war can no longer be confined to the battlefield, but we can only do the right as we see the right, and reverently commit our cause to God.

Sometimes, most of the time, it's not how you say it, it's whether you say it.

It is one of the easiest human endeavors, I suspect, to come up with all the reasons for why we shouldn't be the one to say what needs to be said. When Isaiah has his vision of the Lord in the temple, high up on his throne – he spoke the truth when he confessed to his unclean lips. “Woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.” No truer words have been said. And the truth is we all can say them. None of us qualified to speak the word. But God touches the lips of Isaiah with the burning coals of his grace – and now Isaiah can say – Here am I! Send me!

You see this is the great adventure of the spiritual life – when you and I give ourselves the chance not just to see all of what might disqualify us from being messengers of the good news, but to go deeper to hear God's baloney – and to find the grace ... the unmerited grace to speak the good news. And it's the good news, right? We are the people of the good news! God loving the world in Christ. God giving himself to the world in Christ. God sacrificing himself for the world in Christ. God claiming all the little children of the world as his children. That at

this table we are accepted in Christ. The world finds its real communion at this table!

Imagine the people in your lives who could use to know that they have been accepted with the unconditional love of God. Imagine all the people in your lives who have heard that maybe they aren't accepted or that they are not good enough or that they are not welcome or that they are too far from God or that they don't have a purpose of their lives --- enslaved by the negative messages of our world – and then imagine through your grace-touched lips – these people hearing, “Hey, I go to a place on Sunday morning where I get reminded that I am loved by a gracious God. I get to go to a place where I am challenged to live a life of meaning and purpose. I get to go to a place where I hear that my sins are forgiven and I am free from all the negativity of the world! I get to go to a place where I hear the word over and over again, “Victory!”

We underestimate don't we – the power of the word. We underestimate the hunger the world has for some good news. This sad, old, conflicted world needs some good news.

Several years ago in Pittsburgh there was a prolonged steel strike, management and the union were miles apart in their demands and it looked like the industry would remain at a standstill for months. A steelworker named Dave Griffith couldn't take it anymore. He felt like God was telling him that it was up to him, a lowly steel worker to do something about it. So Dave walked into the negotiating room one day uninvited and he pled for the two sides to reconcile their differences for the sake of the people of Western Pennsylvania. Not long after that the strike was settled. Now for a man to get the courage to do something that bold is one thing but when that man is a severe stutterer, mortified to talk in front of groups of people, that is someone who heard God's baloney – and found a way to say what needed to be said.

And maybe that was true for Mary. Good ol' Mary Magdalene. Sinner. Possessed with evil spirits earlier in her life. First century woman whose job it was to remain silent. Oh, she had all the excuses for why she should keep her mouth shut. Good ol' Mary who showed up at that great battle twenty centuries ago between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Up on the mountain called Calvary. She showed up to see the battle between good and evil. And when they rolled the stone away and life conquered death, off she went. Off she went with this message that maybe nobody would believe. This message that maybe she wouldn't say just right. But off she went on her own little marathon. A marathon across the miles and the centuries. And at the end of her marathon, she stands before the disciples and she stands before us and she says, “I have seen the Lord.” And for those who hear her ... who really hear her ... what they hear is the word, “Victory”.

Victory, my friends. We got the word, Victory. We have seen the Lord. No more prisoners. No more shame. No more condemnation. All are invited to the table. All are accepted. All have a place. Good news! And the only thing left is for us to say it.



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Church of the Palms

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