

LIFT UP YOUR EYES
Scripture Lesson: 2 Kings 6:11-17; Hebrews 12:1, 2.

COMMENTS ON THE LESSONS

I've never preached a sermon upon this text from 2 Kings, although I imagine that some of you have heard some other preacher expound upon it. It's one of those miracle stories about the prophet Elisha, the successor to that other famous prophet, Elijah. The situation being described is one in which the Arameans (called the Syrians in older translations) are making war on Israel. The king of Aram is upset because, just when he thinks he has the Israelites cornered, some special, supernatural intelligence that the king of Israel receives from Elisha allows the Israelites to escape. So the king of Aram, suspecting that there's an informant in his own camp, asks his lieutenants what's going on. This is where we tune in on the action.

After that, we read similar words from the Letter to the Hebrews, stating that our battles here on earth are being observed by a great cloud of witnesses, as though the saints in glory are cheering us on from the bleachers of heaven.

SERMON

It has been both an honor and a pleasure to be one of your guest preachers on three previous occasions during these summer months. Even though I sit here worshipping with you on almost every Sunday throughout the year, enjoying "the view from the pew," observing other preachers making it through their sermons, it has been a nice change enjoying the view from the pulpit, getting through my own sermons—and somehow wobbling my way down to floor level afterwards, aided by Pastor Bruce and my trusty staff, somewhat like Moses of old who carried a staff that could perform all sorts of miraculous stuff. His, however, was not collapsible for air travel.

In my previous sermons, I've told you a bit about my youth and upbringing, which was without benefit of church and Sunday school, and of how, finally, I found an old New Testament in our attic, began reading and memorizing it, and ended up as an enthusiastic convert in an ultra-fundamentalist church in which a very legalistic lifestyle was the rule. Smoking, drinking, lipstick for women, card-playing, dancing, attending movies, and other worldly pleasures were all taboo. While it may sound boring and burdensome for a teenager, I accepted it joyfully. Throughout my college years, there was no partying, no dancing, and no movies. Despite this heavy legalism, the great plus was that the people of that church treated this formerly churchless kid with care, prayer, and kindly support. There was, however, one great minus: the church's pastor had little to do with denominational or practical ecclesiastical matters. The result was that, upon graduation from Princeton Seminary, I had received no guidance whatsoever about the careful evaluation of a call to what would be my first church.

Thus, when the seminary placement office sent me to be interviewed as a possible candidate by a church in Newburgh, New York, I accepted their offer of a call immediately, without considering any other possibilities, and without carefully examining what I was getting into. It didn't take very long, however, to discover that, in accepting their call, I had become the captain of a sinking ship.

Shortly after my arrival, in responding to a denominational membership survey, I discovered that 40% of the members were over 65 years of age. Another 45% were between 55 and 65, and the remaining 15% accounted for the fact that there were very few young families and children in the church. It was as though I had become the chaplain of a retirement/nursing home. Officiating at funerals was a frequent activity; infant baptisms were a rare occurrence.

The building was much too large for the tiny remnant of what had once been a large congregation. Because a horseshoe balcony ringed the sanctuary (as in the old photo, taken in 1902, on today's bulletin cover), it had a seating capacity for 600 worshippers. The oldest members remembered their childhood days when it would be filled to overflowing on both on Sunday morning and evening in the early 1900s when an eloquent protégé of Henry Ward Beecher delivered spell-binding sermons. Indeed, the famed Beecher had delivered the installation sermon for this young pulpit prince, Alexander B. Jack. One of its former pastors, Charles Cuthbert Hall, had become president of Union Theological Seminary in New York. However, those golden days were long gone. The building was in a state of disrepair, beyond the resources of the faithful few (75 at the most during the high holy days of Christmastide and Easter, but more likely 25-50 on regular Sundays). Until my arrival, summer attendance was so low that the church was closed during July and August.

There was not enough of a crew to keep this little ship from sinking. The total annual budget of the church upon my arrival was \$7,800. It came as no surprise when I learned that there had even been some talk (even some informal invitations) about closing the church and merging with a larger congregation several blocks away. For a brilliant, young seminary graduate (as I regarded myself to be), it was very tempting to suspect that I might be wasting my fragrance in the desert air.

So what could I do but dream that, somehow, I might preach this church back into its former splendor? It was a crazy strategy, but I didn't know what else to do. Thus, when I wrote sermons, I would pretend that I was writing them for that great congregation of yesteryear. After all, I had to do something to keep my spirits alive. I had been taught at seminary to preach without a manuscript, and this acquired skill aided me in this effort to produce a spell-binding Sunday morning performance. By the time I entered the pulpit on Sunday morning, I would have "psyched" myself up into a homiletical high, as though I was preaching to a "full house." Thus, I would try to imagine that even the huge horseshoe balcony was filled with worshippers (although we didn't even bother dusting it!). I would preach as though I was addressing an invisible throng filling the empty pews. On one Sunday I worked myself up into this pretense so convincingly that one old-timer looked up into the balcony to see if anyone was actually sitting there! Of course, as you can guess, as important as preaching can be, there are tired old congregations in declining downtown neighborhoods that, for all kinds of demographic realities, cannot be preached back into their former glory. But maybe my zany, seemingly staged, make-believe manner of delivery wasn't that crazy after all. Why? As I preached to that huge, encircling, empty balcony, I was urging them to look up and see something invisible, something that eye cannot see. So I ask this question: was that balcony actually empty?

Could it be that, whenever we worship, we are still surrounded by the heavenly hosts? If we had spiritual vision, would we see what Elisha's servant was able to see, that "the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire?" Is the world of the angelic beings closer than we realize? John Chrysostom, the saintly 4th century Bishop of Constantinople wrote, "Open the eyes of faith and thou shalt behold a theatre of spectators, for if the air is filled with angels, much more the church."

Or is it, as we read in the Letter to the Hebrews, that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, as the saints in glory look down upon us from the bleachers of eternity, cheering us on as we run our race? Guesses, of course, only guesses. But many serious Christians throughout the centuries have believed in such invisible, spiritual realities.

Or was it, at the very least, that was I preaching to a sanctuary filled with memories of the days when that balcony was full, and to hopes and dreams that it might somehow be filled again, that this tiny congregation of wrinkly old folks might somehow survive, somehow have a surprising, glorious future?

One lesson I was learning from my crazy experiment was that the balcony is never empty. There's always more than can be seen in every sanctuary when God's people gather for Word and Sacrament. Even on days in some little country church when attendance is low, there's always much more in front of the preacher than we can see. Whenever we preach, we're preaching to precious memories, hopes, dreams, broken hearts, despairing spirits, lives on the outset of some wonderful adventure, or on the brink of spiritual surrender.

What a shock it was to me, many years later in my ministry, when a "little old lady" phoned and asked me to sit with her through the night because she was on the verge of suicide—and all along, she had been there in worship every Sunday. I would never have known that I was preaching to such a despairing soul, to such potential spiritual disaster. That's why preaching must never be light, clever, catchy, comedic entertainment; we're preaching to souls, either on the edge of ecstasy, or on the cliff of catastrophe. That's why the old Scots called the pulpit "the sacred desk," because we are transacting eternal business as we preach. We need not be morbid or take ourselves too seriously, but we need to remember what C.S. Lewis called "the weight of glory" that surrounds every life.

And that applies to all of you, because you, too, are preachers, proclaiming by the wordless witness of your lives the good news of God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness. You need to preach to the seemingly empty balcony of every life, to life agendas that are deep and invisible. The young check-out girl at the grocery store looks troubled today. Is she pregnant and wondering what's next? Then there's the waitress at the restaurant, trying to make it through another night, or the man sitting at the bar, staring into the bottom of an empty glass, wondering how to find "something precious" he lost along the way, or the man who collects your trash who's meant for more than his stinking job, or the voice at the other end of the line as you seek help with your computer—all of these precious souls need your smile, your kindness, your patience, your tenderness, some word of friendliness and hope that may make all the difference, all the eternal difference in their lives. You need to let the Christ in you speak to the unrecognized Christ who is seated, unrecognized, in the balcony of every life.

Well, I continued my ministry in that mostly empty sanctuary, preaching to my imaginary congregation. And then, a series of even crazier events began to unfold. It was as though "all heaven broke loose." Despite my Sunday morning performance, along with a few wise elders, I knew that my imaginary balcony congregation wasn't paying the bills. We couldn't survive in that huge building. It was full of memories, but you can't fix the roof or pay the coal bill with memories. The former splendor was over. It was time to leave the old homestead, and find some little home we could afford. In those days, you could build a spacious ranch home for \$25,000. So why couldn't we build a little church for much less than \$40,000?

And so we looked for property where we could build a little church. We found an affordable property on the north end of town. When we told the owner what we intended build there, he said that we needed to look at his son's mansion. His son had bought it too hastily, and now wanted to move. It was only a few miles away, and he arranged to take us there on the following day. It was one of those classic Hudson River mansions, built in the days when such "castles" lined the hills above the Hudson. Built in 1905, in the English Tudor style, it had 26 rooms, a bar and billiard room—plenty of rooms for Sunday School classes, plus an apartment for the pastor. Most amazing of all, he took us across the main parlor to a door that opened on to a small balcony, overlooking what appeared to be a ballroom. Paneled in limed chestnut, it had stained glass windows. But it was not a ballroom; instead, it was built by the original owner as his music room so that, at the far end there was, of all things, a pipe organ! Add pews, pulpit, lectern, and a chancel, and it would seat 200 people, just right for us. It was just waiting to be made into a splendid little sanctuary. The price was only \$65,000.

Just shortly after this discovery, as though "out of the blue," a Baptist pastor friend (the one who, a short time later, would introduce me to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.) came and asked, "Now, Morgan, I don't want to insult you, but we've noticed that your building is too big for your little flock. Would you consider selling it to us?" We sold it for \$35,000.

Several months later, when all of these crazy happenings came to completion, we held a joint service with that Baptist congregation in our old sanctuary so that they could march in as we marched out. We officially passed the keys to them, and I delivered the sermon that day. It was a sermon like no other my congregation had ever heard from me, cheered on by a chorus that responded with "Amen, Brother," "Make it plain," and other such joyful affirmations that I had never elicited from my own congregation. And best of all, guess what? I was preaching to a full, live balcony. It was God's plan to fill that balcony, but in God's way, and in God's time, with another congregation of God's people!

Well, everything turned around for my little sinking ship. God had somehow enabled us to weather the gale and reset the sail. It was not that we became a much larger church. We became a younger, healthier church, with lots of children. Attendance increased, the Sunday School grew in size, and the annual budget quadrupled. A series of divine accidents had saved our little church. But now, another adventure began for me, one that has been going on ever since.

My family lived in an upstairs apartment in this new church. For little Hillie, our first child, it was as though she was a princess living in a castle. However, I was the one who, most of all, got to enjoy this new church, because I now "lived in my church." My daily "commute" to work was down a flight of stairs. I had a splendiferous study just off the sanctuary, so I had only to open the door, step out onto the balcony, and it became my sanctuary, my private place of prayer. I prayed alone in that sanctuary so often that I finally realized that I not only lived in my church; my church "lived in me." That lovely sanctuary had become a little sanctuary inside my heart.

The day came, however, when it was time to move on to another challenge in another church. My last Sunday in that sanctuary was a tearful one. I hardly made it through the final verse of the last hymn, which is the one we sing here at Church of the Palms following the benediction every Sunday. Yes, I left that church behind, but I've carried that little sanctuary with me in my heart ever since.

I can hardly pray without seeing it and remembering all the dear saints who loved, cared, and were patient and forgiving with me as a boy preacher. It will always be in my heart, just like some other church or holy place will always be in your heart.

People have different holy places in their hearts. Some of you remember the church of your childhood. Others remember some other church, maybe the one where they raised their children, or maybe the one where, under some faithful pastor or teacher, Christ became real for them. The little sanctuary for some people is not even a church building. For some it is a northern lake at sunset, or a place in the mountains that inspires them to “lift up their eyes unto the hills.” I knew a young woman who, when she prayed, always remembered a tree in the backyard of her childhood; she went there to pray and think things through as a little girl. Even after she discovered that it had been cut down when she went back years later for a visit, that tree is still living in her heart. For others, their holy place is a special picture or painting which, for some reason, assists them when they pray.

The great gift of God to each of us is that there’s some holy place within our heart where we can always go in prayer. We’ve been there in times of joy and sorrow, in times of great success or terrible failure. But there’s always Someone who meets us there. That Someone, the Christ, will always be there, will never leave us or forsake us when we are in that little sanctuary. So, whatever may be the little church in your heart, go there often; indeed, live your life out of that holy place. Take friends and enemies with you to that place; talk things through with them in that holy silence. Take it with you “where cross the crowded ways of life” so that your thoughts and words will always be peaceful and loving. When you pray for even the most difficult people in that inner sanctuary, you will find yourself being kinder and more hopeful about them, seeing them by faith in their “Sunday best self.” Stay in your little church; live every moment of your life there from this day forward.

Live in your holy, inner sanctuary until, on some future day at life’s eventide—who knows?—you’ll lift your eyes and behold on those shining mountains, those “horses and chariots of fire,” coming to carry you home.

God be with you ‘til we meet again!