

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Good Will Hunting

2 Samuel 7.1-11, 16; Luke 1.26-38

Russ Dean, December 18, 2005



I have never known whether to fear them, pity them, or hold them in highest esteem. “Them” referring to the, either fearless or foolish band of brothers known as “hunters.” They rise before dawn and trek through miles of wood or bog to sit. Motionless. In the cold and dark. They clothe themselves like the undergrowth and paint themselves in camouflage colors.¹ And I don’t know whether it’s bragging or complaining, but they love to tell you their extreme stories... “Last time I went duck hunting, we had to break the ice just to get in the water... Stood there for four hours...” With boneless, skinless, ready-to-cook duck breasts available from every Harris Teeter in town, something just isn’t right about this picture! (I suppose you can see which direction I lean on the fearless-to-foolish scale!)

But, there is something to learn from their discipline and from the preparation and the freedom that characterizes their desire. There is something important for us who sit in the sometimes cold and dark and lonely days of Advent-waiting. The people of God waited for centuries, sustaining the posture and the preparedness of the very best of the woodland warriors, and a few of them, though not necessarily the ones you would expect, caught a glimpse of the long-expected one when he finally arrived. A few of them,

¹ If you want a good chuckle sometime, pick up a hunting supply catalogue and glance through it, noticing all the products that are commercially available to the hunter with the deepest pockets and the most undying desire to bring home the biggest Buck or the wily-est water foul. Perhaps, only in America would grown men spend hard-earned, cold cash for a little aerosol container of odor-of-deer-urine, just for a chance at the big boy.

though not necessarily the ones you would expect, tracked him from a distance, studied his habits, observed his every move.

In this Advent season, let us learn from their search, even from a young girl who heard a surprising message, filled with promises.² How will we hear such Good News? And what will it look like when it comes?

Good news... is the word that *will not pass away*. It is the message of God. Our only proof.³ And though it does not always come to us in the throats of a heavenly host, neither can it be silenced. No matter how dark the circumstance, no matter how fleeting the light. From ghetto to prison cell the Good News has been spoken – and it has been heard. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Victor Frankl tells how he heard the good word, even in the horrors of a concentration camp:

...for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth — that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which [we] can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of [humanity] is through love and in love.⁴

True life begins when we hear this word, and this News is also the end – the greatest for which we can hope, the best to which we can aspire.

Have you heard it?

² Prior to the reading of scripture I asked our children to count the number of promises they heard – these, in the form of the verbs “will.” There are twelve such promises in the passage I read.

³ I find myself constantly engaged with the skeptics (even a few in our congregation!), always trying to “prove God.” I am not sold by the naturalists’ belief that even love can be explained as a result of the purely random chance of Darwin’s natural selection. It is in the reality and power of love that I find God.

⁴ I located this quotation on the web at: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/questionofgod/voices/frankl.html>.

What we have tried to say to you this Advent season is that Good Will Hunting begins by making preparation. By listening to the sound of our own heart beats, and not to the world's noisy commercials: *For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also* (Matthew 6.21). By rising early and sitting in the silence of our own souls: *Be still and know that I am God I* (Psalm 46.10). By equipping our minds with an openness to hear Truth, no matter how it challenges us: *Study to show thyself approved* (2 Timothy 2.15). By arming ourselves (please forgive the inappropriate pun) with the only strength, which really blesses the world: *Blessed are the peacemakers* (Matthew 5.9).

The first Minister of Education with whom Amy and I worked loved to say of people who could never seem to get anywhere on time: "People are late – because they plan to be late." We are the result, in large measure, of our own preparations. If you've not heard the Good News, this season – maybe it's because you have planned, not to hear it.

We hear by planning, and we hear the Good News when we are free to hear it. The skeptic speaks of the lack of "evidence" for God. And this skepticism is true enough, if we are looking for God under a microscope, through a telescope, in the stories that weave together the assorted narratives, anecdotes, reports, and eyewitness accounts of our gathered empirical data. This skepticism is Gospel, if we look for God as the "solve to" variable in the formulas of mathematics, in the Socratic logic of philosophy, in the testable truths of hard science.

But truth and knowledge have never been limited to that which is tangible, empirical, or strictly rational. Do we really need, much less want, a god who is

visible enough for science to see? Finite enough for philosophy to conceive?
Conceivable enough for mathematics to define? I am hardly arguing for a blind
obedience, for that kind of religion always becomes an “opiate of the people.”⁵ I
am arguing that we should be free: Free from coercion of church and doctrine.
Free for intellectual and individual pursuit. But we must also be free from the
intellectual and personal biases that can keep us from the deeper dimensions of
knowing that have been available even long before science ruled our world.⁶

Life’s meaning, God’s Good News for us, comes not in explanation, but in
experiencing the freedom for which, Paul says, *Christ has set us free* (Galatians
5.1).

Again, Victor Frankl:

Dostoevski said once, "There is only one thing that I dread: not to be
worthy of my sufferings." These words frequently came to my mind after I
became acquainted with those martyrs whose behavior in camp, whose
suffering and death, bore witness to the fact that the last inner freedom
cannot be lost. It can be said that they were worthy of their sufferings; the
way they bore their suffering was a genuine inner achievement. It is this
spiritual freedom — which cannot be taken away — that makes life
meaningful and purposeful.⁷

How will we hear? Preparation. Freedom.

⁵ This is the famous objection of Karl Marx to Christianity and other organized religion.

⁶ I did not do a very good job of arguing this point, which was actually central to my purposes today. The “promises” of God required the eyes of faith to see. These promises will not be available to the one who cannot, or will not, believe. I am working from a recent experience with a person who has experienced increasing doubt in his own faith, especially in light of the findings of evolutionary science. His God was being squeezed out by the fact that a naturalistic science sees no “need” for God. In a recent conversation, he spoke of the lack of “evidence” that God “works.” I was thinking of his own need to find God, as one would find mathematical or scientific evidence, and, of course, God cannot be found in empirical data. Wouldn’t a god who could be scientifically proved actually cease to be God? I believe that the rationalism and dependence on empirical data, upon which science is based, has blinded many people to the other ways of “knowing” that we experience in our everyday life. We do not doubt love or truth or honesty, just because they have no empirical bases, do we? If the universe may turn out to be a reality in eleven dimensions, as some physicists think, is it so unreasonable to believe that humans might be capable of knowing in ways that extend beyond the five senses?

⁷ From the same internet source as the previous quotation.

Maybe you heard about the two hunters who came upon a set of tracks. One argued that they were bear tracks. The other, that they were deer tracks. “Bear tracks...” “Deer tracks...” Back and forth they argued, each round getting louder and louder, each seeking to convince the other of the rightness of his position. And while they argued, the train came and ran them over!

Excuse me for using such a poor joke to make such an important point. If we want to see God, when God comes among us, again, we must not only be prepared, and free to see God, but even more fundamentally, we must know what we are really looking for. As poor and far-fetched as the joke is, however, it seems to me that it’s not that far afoot from where many people spend their time looking for God.

Luke tells us that the birth of Christ was announced to the shepherds. There are no wealthy, well-trained magi in his gospel. Luke’s gospel is a Good Word for the poor and oppressed. The mother is a peasant girl. The birth is in a barn. The cradle is a feeding trough. The first to hear of the blessed coming are those who were dirty and down-hearted, some of the *least of these* (Matthew 25) in their society.

The angel said (as they always do), “*Do not be afraid – I bring you good news... for all the people*” (Luke 2.10). But the words in our New Revised Standard are then troubling. A great multitude of angelic hosts fill the sky, and a word of limited good news comes: *Glory to God... and on earth peace among those whom God favors!*” (vs.14).

Whom does God favor? Or, maybe more importantly, whom does God not favor? Is Good Will for only an elite few? Will we find it among the rich? The famous? The well-heeled? The fortunate? The doctrinally pure?

Fred Craddock says that the key to understanding the angels' praise hinges on the placement of one single comma. It might be the most important grammar-lesson the world ever learned. The Greeks used no grammar when they wrote, so we can hear Good Will as offered only to those whom God favors. And, if we hear as such, then we will inevitably begin to look for God's promises fulfilled in health and wealth and prosperity.

But... we can also read, "*Glory to God... peace to all humanity (comma), whom God favors!*"

Good Will is for all.⁸ When we have seen the simplest act of kindness. We have seen God. When we have seen the hungry fed. We have seen God. When we have seen people freed from bondage of any kind. We have seen God. When we have heard the good word of love and forgiveness, even within our own souls. We have seen God.

God's promises are empty only when we cannot see them. Only when with our own lives, we do not fill them to overflowing with Good Will to All People.

God's Good Will is all around. Happy Hunting!

May it be so!

⁸ Craddock adds a warning to his insight: "The preacher or the teacher will want to avoid flattening out Luke simplistically, cheapening grace or absolutizing moral and ethical expectations." *Interpretation*, "Luke," p.36.

