

# The Park Road Pulpit

*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

*Song without Verbs*

*Luke 2.8-14*

Russ Dean, December 23, 2007



In August I preached from the Good Samaritan<sup>1</sup> and suggested that one of the three religious elites passed by the man in the ditch because he was too busy. This hypothesis prompted a little rabbit chasing on my part, time for me to explore out loud my belief that Americans are obsessed with work. Despite the good that our “Protestant work ethic” has done us, I opined that it has also driven us to distraction. Instead of yielding the benefits of work, when it is a means to an end, our work is making us sick. I supported my opinion with a scant smattering of the truckloads of evidence that exist in medical journals regarding the health effects of an unproductive work life, and the stress that such an understanding of work brings.

At the door that morning one of my best critics and supporters, and one of the hardest working, most faithful members of this church said, “I don’t know what to think of your sermon, Russ... I’m a work ethic kind of person.” **Buck Blankenship** and I exchanged a few emails that week; I thanked him sincerely for his hard work, and shared with him that I, too, am a “work ethic kind of person.” Nothing puts me in a fouler mood than to have a day off, and to not do anything productive to do at home. I know the feeling of needing, wanting, yes, believing in doing something, all the time.

But I stand by my admonition that for all its benefits, there is also something insidious in our work. It is certainly true that too many Americans don’t know the value of work. And hard

---

<sup>1</sup> August 5, 2007, “Something There is that Doesn’t Love a Wall.” The sermon can be found on our website, [www.parkroadbaptist.org](http://www.parkroadbaptist.org), under the “worship” tab.

work works a unique benefit in the heart, the mind, and in the soul. But I want to explore with you again today the idea that there is more to life than the verbs that can be used to describe us, for the song of the angels is a short course on such an idea. On this Christmas Sunday, I hope we can learn from their heavenly truth.

To support today's sermon, however, I chose the wrong translation of scripture. I read, as is our custom, from the New Revised Standard Version, but though I am hardly a biblical scholar I don't believe this translation of the angels' praise best conveys their message. "*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors*" is troubling, because it implies that God's peace is limited. That God, just because God is God, I suppose, chooses on whom to grant divine favor. This connotation does no justice to the grace of God, which Luke throughout his gospel presents as surprising, and surprisingly universal. Fred Craddock, the Methodist commentator and preacher, notes that the Greek manuscripts used no punctuation. He suggests one little comma clears up the misunderstanding: "*on earth peace among all humankind (comma), with whom God is pleased.*"

But more to the point of today's message, the NRSV includes the use of a verb, "*those whom God favors*." The Greek text is verb-less. (The word translated "favors," is *eudokia*, a noun which refers to God's "good pleasure.") The King James Version is better, then, in both instances: *Glory to God in the highest, and one earth peace, goodwill toward men* (all). Not a single verb.<sup>2</sup> Not a single outright call to action. Not a single angel seems obsessed with doing anything to prove him or herself worthy of God's providential care. There is no call to action based on the restlessness of anxious hearts.<sup>3</sup> There is no demand for work to appease a jealous

---

<sup>2</sup> I am aware, of course, of all of the implied verbs (and "verbals," as one smirking English teacher reminded me at the door), that fill this song. (Who gives glory to God? And how? And peace on earth – by what means? At whose hand? etc...)

<sup>3</sup> As a lifelong fan of the singer, Sting, I had in mind his lyric, "Be still my beating heart..."

and angry god. There are no verbs – just a song. [Gloria en excelsis deo!<sup>4</sup>] Can you hear it? [Gloria en excelsis deo!] The song is just a joyful acknowledgment of the presence of God on earth, and the hope that such a radical affirmation, the joy that such an improbable reality should imply: the good pleasure of God with us means peace to all.

Especially in terms of our relationship with God, I think we humans are obsessed with doing. We need to learn the art of being, and the joy of the noun and the adjective.<sup>5</sup> Whatever is the cause of such insecurity, we seem also to impose upon God. Both the fanatic and the skeptic are obsessed with the verbs of God. The fanatic finds God in the most ridiculous things – athletes give praise to Jesus for winning touchdowns; televangelists credit God with sending hurricanes and disease to prove God’s power and dis-pleasure. A group of wackos in Texas are out praying up and down the shoulder of I35 because they believe it’s the highway of Isaiah 35<sup>6</sup>, and they want God to do something there! The fanatic is determined to find God doing something around us.

And the skeptic is convinced there is no God, because she cannot see God in the microscope, because he cannot find God in the telescope. A rash of atheistic books on the shelves today claims there is no God, because the sciences, one by one, have disproven the

---

<sup>4</sup> These hymn phrases were sung by Amy Jacks Dean, who was sitting on the rostrum.

<sup>5</sup> I have asked in other sermons, “Why can we not learn to relax in the grace of God?” And today’s unison Prayer of Confession read: Teach us, O God, to sing your glory. Forgive our restlessness. Forgive our fear. In this season find us as shepherds on that nighttime hillside. Calm our wandering, give us trust, that we may “*Be still and know that you are God*” (Psalm 46.10).

<sup>6</sup> *A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God’s people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray...*” Isaiah 35.8. I learned of these fanatics in a recent news show. I have no idea what would possess someone to put together Isaiah 35 and I35 and actually believe there’s some divine connection, but there are people all along this Texas corridor stopping along the roadside to pray, loudly that all the sinful and corrupt business owners whose businesses front I35 will repent and come to Jesus. So what could it possibly mean that “*not even fools, shall go astray*”!?

action of God.<sup>7</sup> But if we weren't obsessed with what God does (or does not do) maybe we could all relax a bit and just come to know God as peace. God as hope. God as presence. God as love. (Those are all nouns!)

I am convinced that God does not stop believing in us when our activity does not justify our existence. What tangible evidence will there be in 100 years that you actually lived?<sup>8</sup> The so-called lack of evidence for God, based on God's "inactivity," is no just cause for disbelief, either.

Our insecurity is revealed in our mostly-selfish praying. God, the great Verb in the Sky, come down here and heal me, save me, help me, give me, teach me, forgive me, stop the wars, feed the children, house the homeless... do something (do you hear it) for us... The fourteenth century German theologian and mystic had it right when he said, "If the only prayer you said in your whole life was 'thank you,' that would suffice." Thank you. Period.

Prayer, like life is a song, not a petition.

There is nothing we can do to "find God." Our fanaticism and our skepticism both lead us down wrong roads. Alfred North Whitehead, who had a great scientific and mathematical mind, knew this truth. Worship is not, he said, "a rule of safety."<sup>9</sup> Not something we must do to make us safe with God. Worship is openness to mystery and wonder, "flight after the unattainable." To those who are open, God comes in the darkness of the night, and all we can do is sing.

---

<sup>7</sup> For example: "Darwin chased God out of his old haunts in biology, and he scurried for safety down the rabbit hole of physics. The laws and constants of the universe, we were told, are too good to be true: a setup, carefully timed to allow the eventual evolution of life. It needed a good physicist to show us the fallacy, and Victor Stengel lucidly does so. The faithful won't change their minds, of course (that is what faith means), but Victor Stengel drives a pack of energetic ferrets down the last major bolt hole and God is running out of refuges in which to hide." Richard Dawkins, in a review of Stengel's, *God, The Failed Hypothesis*.

<sup>8</sup> From John Updike's *Toward the End of Time* (the character Ben Turnbull is speaking): "What doesn't fade into the void?... Some day I will be as forgotten, as dissolved back into the compacted silt, as your typical grunting, lusting, hungry, broken-boned Neanderthal man. I simply cannot believe it! And that is simply stupid of me."

<sup>9</sup> These words were printed in our bulletin, though I have no specific citation: "The worship of God is not a rule of safety – it is an adventure of the spirit, and flight after the unattainable," Alfred North Whitehead.

The story of the Child of Bethlehem, and Jesus' life and teachings, in particular, imply enough activity to fill a lifetime with verbs: Do justice, Love mercy. Walk humbly. Love God. Love enemy. Forgive. Serve. Take up your cross... But such activity is a response. Joseph Sittler says, "The songs of praise the church sings are a lyrical way of disclosing what the faith knows and how we know." And we can only know by being still... and by singing what we hear.<sup>10</sup>

May it be so!

[Trumpet: Gloria in excelsis deo!<sup>11</sup>  
Congregation: Gloria en excelsis deo!]<sup>12</sup>

How might we pray without verbs?<sup>13</sup> Amy Jacks Dean spoke this prayer as our Prayer of Intercession:

"Hear now a prayer of intercession without verbs:  
"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will to all people"

[pause]

*Glory to God...*

Mary...

Zechariah...

angels...

shepherds...

child in a manger...

*On earth peace...*

---

<sup>10</sup> "God respects me when I work, but he loves me when I sing." Rabindranath Tagore.

<sup>11</sup> At this time, a trumpet sounded the initial line of the hymn, and the congregation was directed to finish the song, as the proper conclusion to the sermon.

<sup>12</sup> I collected the following quotations during my study for the sermon but did not use them. Since they are relevant, however, I include them here: "'Sing and make melody in your heart to the Lord' (Ephesians 5.19)... Where the heart is not singing there is no melody, there is only the dreadful medley of human self-praise. Where the singing is not to the Lord, it is the singing to the honor of the self or the music, and the new song becomes a song to idols" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer). "And learn there may be worship without words" (James Russell Lowell). "To my mind the most poignant mystical exhortation ever written is 'Be still and know that I am God'" (Arnold Bennett). "To be completely found in all dimensions of our fearful hiddenness initiates a profound shift in consciousness. We begin to trust that the God whose terrible majesty and mysterious otherness are rightly to be feared is not against us but for us (Romans 8.31). Although we remain aware of our vulnerability to the hard edges of the world, a greater truth embraces our life – the fearful and wonderful solicitude of God who, in Jesus Christ, covers our nakedness with the impregnable courage of love. This is the bold and vital assurance of the Good News heard by... the shepherd in their pastures... Even as Jesus is our righteousness, so is he also our fear of the LORD. He embodies in his life and perfects in his death the holy fear that engenders wisdom and the courageous love that casts out disabling fear" (John Mogabgab).

<sup>13</sup> I was once counseled by a mentor who said that in her own prayer life she had had to learn to pray without using verbs. Her wisdom seems more and more appropriate, and has been a great help in developing my own spiritual discipline and my theology of prayer.

at PRBC...  
in Charlotte, NC...  
in America and Iraq and China and South Africa...

*Good will to all people...*

neighbors...

enemies...

homosexuals... the homeless...

*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will to all people.*

Thanks be to God.

Amen!"