

When the Lights Go Out

A sermon by Rev. Dr. Gregory Young
Presented on Sunday, November 14, 2010

Sermon Prayer:

Let us pray. God, your word is a living word, a gracious word, a word that comes to us in so many different ways, but especially has come to us in your son, our savior. And we praise your name that your spirit has touched our spirits and has drawn us here today. As you speak to us, O God, may your words fall on ears ready to hear, hearts ready to receive, and hands and feet ready to live as your people as we go forth in Christ's name.

Amen.

Sermon:

Now I don't know if I'm ever going to talk about "When the lights go out," so just be prepared for that. It may come up in the sermon; it isn't in there right now. The sermon title just sort of got me as I looked around at this beautiful sanctuary and I thought about that reading from Jesus, those teachings, and I thought what would happen you know if the lights went out and the wall came down, and the roof caved in and this beautiful place was no longer here. And so that's what prompted the sermon title. But probably a better sermon title would be "Ruts." And that sounds a little unusual.

But there is a little old country lane that many, many, many years ago before the automobile even came into existence had a curious little sign at the beginning of the lane saying "Choose your ruts wisely." And as the carriages would roll over that lane year after year, decade after decade, they started to wear ruts into the dirt. Ruts that were ironclad. And if you were journeying down that lane you had to choose your ruts wisely because you may be in those ruts for a long time before you can get out of them. You may be going down that country lane and want to turn off

to the right or to the left, but you chose the wrong ruts in the beginning and your wheels are not able to turn out of the rut to get to the place where you were hoping to go. And so you might go miles out of your way until you were able to get out of that set of ruts and get back on track to the place where you were journeying. Life is like that in many ways. Every decision that we make along life's way, every action that we take in life has an ultimate meaning for us and for others.

Think of this for a moment: a young man wakes up one day and maybe he's thinking he needs to feed his drug habit. Or maybe he's thinking, "You know, we have a special day coming up in our family and I really want to give my mom a special gift." Or maybe this young man has a family of his own and he's thinking, "I don't know how I am going to feed my children." And so he gets up out of bed and he starts to devise a plan. I'm going to walk down to the convenience store and I'm going to rob it so that I can have some money so I can do what I need to do. And as he starts to walk out of his apartment he picks up a pistol and tucks it into his jacket. Walks down to the convenience store, never giving a thought to what might happen beyond his plan.

And so he walks into the store and he waits until a customer leaves. And then he walks up to the cash register and says, "Give me your money." And the person on the other side of the counter says, "Go away. Don't do this." And he pulls out the pistol in an effort to bring fear into that other person's eyes and heart. And he holds it out, "Give me your money or I'll kill you." And the person says, "No." And then the unthinkable happens, the trigger is pulled; the bullet enters the cashier's heart and the person drops dead on the floor while the young man pulls the money out of the register and runs out of the store.

That decision that he had made when he first woke up that morning became a life changing decision for him. Each step of the way there was another decision to make. Will I really go down and rob this store? Do I really

need to pick up this pistol and bring it along with me? And as he walked to the convenience store, do I really need to do this? Maybe there might be another way, but desperation had gotten a hold of this young man and he wasn't thinking clearly of what lay ahead for him.

You could write the end of that story because it repeats itself many times around the world. People making decisions that at the time may be seem like a fairly decent decision to make but ultimately can lead to chaos and ruin; can lead to imprisonment and death.

We make thousands of decisions in our lifetimes. What time should I get up tomorrow? What will I wear to work or to school or to go shopping today? Will I buy this outfit that I like even though I can't afford it? Will I tell my boss today how I really feel about her? You know I really like donuts and my doctor told me I needed to lose some weight but one little glazed donut won't hurt. I'll start my diet tomorrow. You know he's really cute; maybe I should sit down and have lunch with him today and get to know him a little better – my husband doesn't have to know and besides it won't hurt, it's not going to lead to anything.

Some of the decisions that we make along life's way seem to be trivial and appear to have no ultimate meaning beyond the moment the decisions being made. Try to convince someone of that who happen to push the snooze alarm one too many times on September 11, 2001 and was traveling into work late trying to figure out what excuse to give the boss when the planes hit the World Trade Center. Or try to convince the young man who robbed the convenience store that his decisions were trivial.

Many times we do not stop to think of the long term impact of our decisions.

Young people especially - and raising two boys I know this - even in their mid to late twenties they think they're immortal; they're going to live forever; they can do anything they want. My youngest looked at me the other day and he said, "You know, Dad, I used to think that the sky was

the limit, but I'm finding out that there are limits." It's a tough thing for a young adult to learn.

Decision making is not simply a mental exercise. It is also spiritual. With each decision we make we should use all that is within our brains – the empirical data, the common sense, past experience, and our relationship with God – to choose the path that will be beneficial not only for us but for others.

In my dentist's office there is a little sign that states very simply – I chuckle each time I read it - "Ignore your teeth and they will go away." Each day as I floss my teeth and I brush my teeth that message flashes through my brain; I also think of the fact that God has given us teeth so we might chew our food and that we might speak to one another and also smile occasionally - wouldn't hurt; I also reflect on others who I have seen over the years struggling with their false teeth, never feeling like they get them in right or they ever fit right. And with these images in my mind starting with that simple little phrase in my dentist's office, it is easy for me to say, "You know what? Yeah, I would like to go to bed right now but I need to stop and floss and brush." And I make that decision with long-term vision in my mind.

The children of Israel had been set free after decades of being held prisoner by their Babylonian conquerors. They had returned to Jerusalem and had worked hard to rebuild what had been lost in the war. They organized themselves under leaders that they believed were chosen by God. They repaired the breaches in the protective wall that surrounded the holy city. They labored to rebuild the Temple. And when the work was all done and finished, the children of Israel looked upon their work and they realized that they had been unable to rebuild Jerusalem the way it was before the war started. The walls were not as strong as they were before; the Temple was not as beautiful as it was before; and the people wept and felt hopeless.

The latter part of the prophecy of Isaiah that our reading comes from today was written for these people. It was a word from God that sought to bring hope to those who had lost all hope again. Isaiah had been given a vision from God that came in the form of a promise. "I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; for the former things will not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight." With this vision the people were invited to look beyond their current circumstances and to see ahead the road of faith that lead to a glorious future. It is their faithfulness and their belief that God was and is speaking through these words that bring us this vision today.

We find ourselves today on the road of faith following the way of Jesus. The vision of new heavens and a new earth, even a New Jerusalem, have not died. They are still there for us. We are traveling this road with those who began the journey centuries ago and their journey continues on. The old country road sign warns us to choose our ruts wisely because we will be in them for a long time and they may take us to places we do not want to go. God invites us, through Jesus the messiah, through the witness of his faithful people that we read in Hebrew Scriptures, to choose the rut in the road of life that leads to heaven. In choosing this rut we begin now to live in the reality to which it leads. If we are in the rut that leads us to heaven, we are already there, my sisters and brothers.

Yes, there are temptations and seductions along the way. There are many voices that call to us from the side of the road bidding us to stop and come and be with them and to follow them. Jesus said there will be many who come in my name but they are not me. Do not listen to them. Do not be distracted but keep your mind's eye, your soul's eye, keep your vision moving forward to the kingdom of God that we know and proclaim as heaven.

There are distractions that will seek to get us to look aside this way and sometimes we will forget and we will go after those distractions, but God does not leave us alone and always provides a way for us to get back on track. Many times we create our own hell by the decisions we make. Philosophers and theologians have made that claim in many different ways over the centuries.

The young man whose picture I painted for you in the beginning of the sermon created his own hell with the decisions that he made each step of the way that day, but he didn't have to do that. He could have chosen that morning to stay in bed rather than get up and go to rob a convenience store. He could've chosen not to pick up that pistol. He could've chosen not to walk the walk from his apartment to the store. He could've chosen not to say those words to the person behind the counter. But because of his choices he created his own hell and God did not leave him abandoned even there, even there.

The one truth that remains for us is that God's invitation and promise are always present and available to us all.

Amen