

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.' Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' But the Lord said to me, 'Do not say, "I am only a boy"; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.'

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, 'Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.'

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

“The Experience of a Lifetime”

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The experience of a lifetime. Experience is a resource of faith for us as United Methodists. John Wesley believed that. He said once, "I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should cease to exist, but I am afraid lest they should exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power." In a church, on a Christmas eve, at a point in the service, candles, flame, darkness, the sanctuary is silent, a moment to behold, pastor and people, candles burning, the glow of the scene, the pastor rose, announced to the assembled, the congregation's quiet meditation turned to laughter when the preacher said it, "Now that everyone is lit, let us sing "Joy to the World." John Wesley said, "Catch on fire with enthusiasm, and people will come for miles to watch you burn." And Wesley said we should not exist ever as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. Having the form of faith without the fire. Let us burn, and be alive.

Experience is a resource of faith. What happens to us helps us deepen our belief. Some experiences are destructive, it must be noted. When we stand in the presence of greatness and take it for granted, when we look at a challenge and settle for less, we go for the bronze, or when we compete for the gold and think that life is a game and people have to lose and we have to win. Some experiences are neutral. They just sit there like baked apples, and life becomes Twitter topics that involve canned fruit and Brussels sprouts and a string of inane, obvious observations, lifting up the remarkable as if it were ultimate. Settling for less and calling it more, or what the theologian Whitehead said, engaging in what he called the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. But some experience has power to empower our faith. Randy Maddox is a United Methodist theologian, professor, Candler School of Theology, Emory University, he speaks of experience as a goad, as a guide, and as a goal from God, so that is the structure of our reflection this morning, as we ponder the meaning of experience as a resource of faith.

First of all, it's got to be said, sometimes things happen, and there is a goad from God. Some experiences get our attention. That's what they do. We may not understand them exactly, but they get our attention. Will Willimon is a preacher, and a writer, and a bishop. Some have said that he does not have an unpublished thought. Once he preached in that Gothic chapel at Duke University, and he had, and he does have, the tendency to drop the endings of his sentences. And a woman came up to him after the service was over and said something to him that got his attention. It was perhaps a goad from God, as she said, "I could tell from your gesticulation that you were agitated about some matter of importance, but unable to make out a word of your sermon, I had no clue about the object of your disease." A goad from God.

The Worship Committee meeting this past week said the pastors of the church, and I think they singled me out, actually, that when we lead in the Lord's Prayer we go too fast, that we should slow down, and let people think about it. It's not a footrace to the end. We've got one group of people saying our services are too long, and another group saying "slow down" on the Lord's Prayer. Well, they're right. It's a goad from God. It can happen to a bishop when the pulpit is high and the crowds are large. It can happen to a pastor when the prayers are quiet and the prayers need a little more time. It can happen when we're set for it to come and we expect it, and it does. It can happen when we hardly notice, and are preoccupied with things that are out of our control. It can happen.

A member of the church, it happened, a goad from God, it got her attention, on an airplane, on a trip. A bridesmaid, she was, had to be there. Said she would. Back of the plane, next to the bathroom, stressed out, angry at herself. Thought she could work all day, and then get across country for the wedding rehearsal, but there was this delay, and the plane didn't move. Finally the door of the plane closed, and a man walked back to the seat beside her. She was iPod connected. "Could I sit with you?" he asked. "I came from first class. Something told me to come back and sit with you." They talked. She unplugged her pod. They talked about faith. For two hours, they talked, and when they landed she was, in her words, a completely different person. A stranger came to sit with

her, and brought her a sense of calm, and helped her find her center. It was a goad from God. It got her attention.

Norris is a chaplain in the Army. Norris Burkes writes a column in our local paper. Chaplain Burkes was in the emergency room in Iraq on the battlefield when the wounded came in. In one room, there was a medic who begged the doctor to save him. He was an expectant father. The doctor was a friend. In the other room was the insurgent who planted the bomb. The medic, the soldier, asked Chaplain Burkes to pray for him. He did. And then that soldier asked Norris to pray for the man who planted the bomb, in the next room. "What should I pray?" The soldier looked at him. "Pray the prayer Jesus prayed, that he prayed on the cross, when he said, 'Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.'" The soldier died, and he got Norris's attention. It was a goad from God. It reminded him that the Christian faith has responsibilities, even in a time of war, to look beyond the hateful deeds. A goad from God is a surprise when we least expect it, or a moment that takes us by surprise with its power to awaken us. It's an act of kindness in a hostile world. It's an impulse of inspiration when there is nothing much to notice.

Did you ever come to church on a Sunday morning when you didn't really want to be here? John Wesley, at a Moravian church, on a day he really didn't want to go to a worship service, heard Paul's letter to the Romans being read and his heart was strangely warmed. Like the disciples on the road, talking to a stranger, found out it was Jesus. Experience will get us, if we let it, a goad from God to wake us up, to get our attention.

Secondly, there are experiences that guide us. Experiences that move us. Experiences that give us direction. Loren Eiseley wrote about it. It's a short story, "The Magician," it's called, and a true story. It happened at a railway station in New York City. He started down a long flight of stairs, and he saw a man. It was his teacher, his mentor, from long ago, who had died ten years before. At the bottom of the stairway, he ascended. Eiseley descended. He turned. Eiseley turned and stumbled. The two men, one going up, one going down. Eiseley tried to speak but no sound came out. The man continued on, disappeared into the crowd. Was it illusion, or a ghost, or a mystery? On his trip back to Philadelphia, he discovered the meaning of this unusual experience. He had been at his administrative job at the University of Pennsylvania for too long. It was time to get back to the work of anthropology and archaeology for which he had been trained. After thinking about it, he went back to his desk at the University and wrote his letter of resignation. The experience became a guide for him, a guide from God.

Visiting at the hospital is an interesting experience. You learn an awful lot about the staff there, and the members of the church you go to see. Sometimes the body cannot heal, until the heart is awakened to the idea of health. And sometimes the heart will not find its count unless there is a smile on the lips and a twinkle in the eye. And sometimes we cannot take a step forward until we are able to see the shortest path to health is humor. She told me the doctors had hoped to put her in rehab. They were trying to find a place, but the beds were filled. She said, rehab is on the floor above the floor where we were. I said, "You're on the fifth floor. It's the top floor. Now, do they have beds and rehab facilities on the roof?" And she smiled and said, "Maybe if they put me on the roof,

they'll expect me to jump off of it. That would be a cure," and she laughed. Somehow, experience brought her faith. She focused her humor and her guide and it took her forward. Sometimes it takes an experience that looks mystical or divine. Sometimes sight only comes to us through blindness by the light. Wisdom only emerges when ignorance is acknowledged, the right path only taken when the wrong path takes us for a while, and it often takes a crisis to bring catharsis that will bring us calm, like Paul on the road when he was blinded could see and was told to go and he went. Experience can be a guide from God that will move us forward. Experience can be a goad from God that will wake us up.

And thirdly, experience can be a goal from God that will change our lives. Pastor Tom, wedding rehearsal. A seven-year-old boy was the ring-bearer. The soloist asked Tom when she was supposed to sing. He said, "After the vows." She said, "What are vows? I need a cue." At that point, the seven-year-old ring-bearer turned to the soloist and said, "The vows are A-E-I-O and U. And by the way, there is no Q." Sometimes there is no Q for those who have no clue, but if we watch, experience can change our lives. It can.

Bill Bright is conservative, fundamentalist, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ. Jim Wallace is liberal, outspoken, editor of the magazine *Sojourners*. Bright spent his life trying to convert the world to Christianity, and Wallace spent his life working for social change. Jim Wallace investigated the religious right and did an article in *Sojourners* magazine on Bright's plan to save America. It was critical. Bright was publicly embarrassed. He denounced *Sojourners* and called Wallace a liar. Two decades, later, Bill and Jim were at the same conference meeting, obviously on opposite sides of the room. Two old men, now, years of battle. Jim hesitated, but screwed up the courage and walked across the room to where Bill was and said, "Bill, I apologize to you. Two months ago I was at a hotel where you were and I knew you were there. I should have gone up to your room, knocked on your door. I should have done that and tried to mend the painful breach between us after all these years. I should have done that, and I didn't do that, and I apologize. And Bright wrapped his arms around Jim and said, "We need to come together. It's been so long. The Lord would have us come together. Jim, I'm so worried about the poor, about what's going to happen to them, and you're bringing us together on that, and I want to support you. We both work for the Lord now. We both follow the Great Commission." Tears in both of their eyes. They had several conversations after that. There was an occasion where they walked on the beach and talked for a few hours.

One day, a letter came to Jim Wallace. "Dear Jim, congratulations on your great ministry for our Lord. I rejoice with you. An unexpected gift designated to my personal use makes possible this modest contribution to your magazine. I wish I had the means to add at least three more zeroes to the enclosed check. Warm affection in Christ, Yours for helping to fulfill the Great Commission, Bill." Inside there was a check for a thousand dollars. As Jim was reading Bill's letter, there was a knock on the door from a staff member. "Did you hear the news? Bill Bright just died. Just died." Jim looked at the postmark on the letter and compared it to the news report of Bill's death. He concluded that the writing of the letter was the last thing Bill Bright did. Bill sent a thousand dollar gift to recognize the magazine that had the expose' of his most embarrassing moment, more than thirty years before, as an affirmation of the ministry of another Christian leader whom he had

regarded as an enemy. Jim could not hold back his tears. It taught him much about promise and power of reconciliation, and never again would Jim Wallace deny the prospect of coming together with those with whom he disagreed. It was a goal of God. It changed his life. Love always does.

Love, Paul said, is patient and kind, it's not jealous or boastful, or arrogant, or rude. It bears all things. It believes all things. It's the one thing that stands when all else has fallen. John Wesley believed that our doctrines may not be the same, but love is always the same. Experience of love is a goal for God as we are reborn into it and changed because of it, and we become what Paul Tillich called a new being. Michelangelo was right when he said the greatest danger for most of us is not in setting our aim too high and falling short, but in setting our aim too low and achieving the mark. There are those experiences when God gives us goals that seem impossible, until we realize we're being invited to live a new life and to become a new person. I love that story of the traveler who stopped to talk to the old farmer who was building a structure of some kind. "What are you putting up?" he said. And the farmer replied, "Well, if I can rent it, it's a rustic cottage, and if I can't, it's a cow shed." What kind of life are we building? What kind of goals are we setting? What kind of difference are we making? What's being said to us that comes from God, and what are we hearing and what are we doing with what we hear? God will goad us to get our attention, guide us to set our direction, and goal us to help us to become a new person. It's the experience of a lifetime, and when does it begin? Just ask Jeremiah. For him, God said, "Before you were born, I knew you, and I consecrated you." The experience of a lifetime, of which I am speaking, began before we were born and it doesn't end the day we die. Wesley said, "Catch fire with enthusiasm and people will come to watch you burn." Now that almost everybody's lit, let's go out and change the world.