

THE SCRIPTURE READING

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?' He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum."'

And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.' When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

“Hoping for Something Better: It’s As Good As It Gets”

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Today is kickoff Sunday and we are invited to wear something or bring something that represents our school colors. Guess there's a casket company somewhere in the South that will make caskets in school colors of your choice. University of Tennessee, University of Alabama, University of Kentucky, University of Georgia. The advertisement says, "College caskets - Put fans into the eternal cheering section." That could be going too far. Maybe a bit over the top, bizarre perhaps. Last week my school, West Virginia university, played Coastal Carolina, and I noticed that their school colors were blue, and that their mascot was called Chanticleer, so I called my sister during the game. She lives in West Virginia and I asked her, "Amy," I said, "What is a Chanticleer?" She said, "Based on what I've seen, as near as I can tell, it's a blue chicken." Friday night the University of West Virginia played Marshall. Now, Marshall is call the thundering herd. Now, that's intimidating. In fact, that game went into overtime.

Life is about facing the thundering herd, not the blue chicken, and often it goes into overtime. And sometimes we lose, because life isn't the way it's supposed to be. It's a flat tire in the middle of nowhere and you're in a hurry. It's a migraine headache at the time of an important meeting. It's a forest fire on the edge of town. A sign on the subway wall said it - "Life is a contradiction, one contradiction after another." Underneath someone had written, "No, it's not." Words on a tombstone said it- "She died of things." If we haven't died of things, it is things that are killing us. The plumbing pipes break, the roof

leaks, the paint peels off the wall, the car won't start, the dog has fleas. Nobody knows the trouble we've seen. It's life. It's kickoff Sunday.

Life isn't what it's supposed to be, and the thing is, Jesus knew that. He wasn't naïve about it. Look at the stories he told. You go down the road on the way to town, and you're beaten and left to die by robbers, and that doesn't make for a good day. You're a farmer, and you go out to plant seed, and you pick up your bag of seed, not knowing it's got a hole in it. By the time you get to the field, you're holding the bag, and it's empty. You hire some people to do some work for you at the beginning of the day. At the end of the day, you decide you're going to pay them generously, and you do, but you pay them all the same, feeling like you've been generous, and yet you hear it from the people who worked longer, they want more. How much is enough? You call a party, it's a banquet, the invitations must have gotten lost in the mail or something. It happens. Nobody shows up. So you go into town and you drag people off the street, because there's no need to waste a good banquet.

Jesus told these stories because he realized how life is. Just like you and I know it is. We hope for something better. We had to settle for something worse. The thundering herd. Or encumbering. Encumbered by things. We hope for something better, we had to settle for something less. And then we hear what Jesus said. His first sermon, in his home church, he said, and he shouldn't have said it, he said, "Today, the Scripture has been fulfilled. Good news has been preached. The blind have received their sight. The oppressed have been set free. Today the Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." He said it. It's as good as it gets. But he was always saying that, it wasn't just a first sermon, he always said that kind of thing. He'd say things like, "It's the kingdom of God, it's here." He would say, "You're the salt of the earth, don't you know? You're the light of the world." He'd say things like that.

In *New Yorker* magazine there was a cartoon, a middle-aged couple standing in the square of a small town, across the street from a restaurant that had a sign that said Free Lunch. The library on the other side of the street had a sign that said Easy Answers. The pharmacy had a sign that said Cure All. And the repair shop advertised with a sign, Quick Fix. And he said to her, "Hey, I like this town." If life were like that, and it isn't, we'd like this town. We'd like this life. But it isn't. But it's the best it can be. That's what Jesus said. It isn't, but he said it is. So, today we're going to look at what he meant by what he said.

First of all, it needs to be noted that there are periods in our life of light and dark. In our spiritual life, periods of light and dark. Erma Bombeck once said, "The most remarkable thing about my mother is that, for thirty years, she served her family nothing but leftovers." The original meal had never been found. Sometimes we feel that the life we're living is like eating leftovers, as far as God is concerned. Sometimes we stand in the light of God, and sometimes it feels as though we're in the dark as far as God is concerned. There are times, Mother Teresa knew it, she had times in her life when God was close and she experienced that light, and heard God say, "Come and carry me into the homes of the poor. Come, be my light." She knew the light of God, and God was alive in her. But there were periods, you see, periods of darkness as well as brilliance. She wrote of that.

She said, "The untold darkness, the loneliness, the continued longing for God, it gives me pain deep in my heart. The place of God in my soul is black. I just long and long for God and then it is that I feel that God does not want me." She never got to the point she didn't believe in God. She just didn't feel that God was there for her. "I cry out, 'My God,' and nothing comes." Light and dark for Mother Teresa. It's part of life, because there is in every soul a dormant period. There are Exodus times when we feel God is present and directing us, and there are exile times when we wonder how it is we sing God's song in a strange land. There are Palm Sunday days when the crowds are cheering us, and we know we're on track, and we're marching to the drum that is beating from on high. And there are Good Friday days when, 'My God, my God,' and it causes us to wonder, how could it be? Where is the course I chose, and where is the God who directed me?

Harriet Beecher Stowe understood this. She knew the light and dark of the soul. She said, "When you get into a tight place and everything goes against you till it seems as though you could not hold on another minute longer, never give up," she said, "because that's just the place and the time that the tide will turn." Life is like that. There is light and there is darkness, and, you see, the answer is faith. If we can find a way to embrace the dark, then we can realize that sometimes, in the midst of the dark, it's our job to be the light. For the answer to the absence of God is always faith. If we can find a way to find God or trust God when God seems absent, then we can face those times. Faith can conquer the dark. It is the only thing that can. It's not just "I believe," it's "I believe when there doesn't seem to be a reason to." It's having the courage to face the darkness, knowing that somewhere there is light to the point that you become the light that you seek. It's continuing to pray to God, even when there seems to be no answer from God, until you begin to realize, in the silence, that your prayer may not be answered as you thought, but in the silence you realize that your prayer has been heard.

It's the kind of faith that got our nation through that first 9/11. As Colin Powell said, "America has suffered a great loss, but has not lost its spirit, its resiliency or its society." And Max Lucado said, and he was right, he said, "We wept for people we did not know. We sent money to families we'd never seen. Talk show hosts read Scriptures. Journalists printed prayers. Republicans stood next to Democrats, Catholics prayed with Jews, skin color was covered by the ashes of the burning towers." We face the dark with faith, and find God, and rediscover the light. Faith can defeat the darkness.

Life is about light and darkness, but it's also about the ebb and the flow. Sometimes the worst thing is what actually happens, not just in spirit. Joan Turelli says her mother drives too fast. She has a lead foot. A Georgia state patrol officer pulled her mother over when she was racing through the state on her way back from Florida. Hoping to get off with a warning, Joan's mother tried to appear shocked when the officer walked up to her car, saying, "Well, I've never been stopped like this before." He asked for her driver's license and then he leaned into the car and said, "What do they usually do, Ma'am, shoot out the tires?" Well, life is an ebb and flow, and there are times when we're on the short end of it, and we feel that they have shot out our tires.

The man who taught theology at Duke Divinity School when I was a first-year student was Jurgen Moltmann. He had come to America for the first time, and I was in the theology class he taught, the systematic theology class. It was a required class. Recently, he's written a book about his life, and he writes about my class. Ironically enough, the book is entitled, *A Broad Place*. And in the book he says, "I had to translate my first lectures into English and have them corrected and then deliver them." He went on to say, "Every beginning is hard, and this one was especially so. The students" I was one of them, by the way, "were not accustomed to hearing two-hour German lectures where they were expected to take notes." Guess we didn't take notes. And he goes on to say, "And I wasn't used to students who chewed gum." And then he went on to say, "But I could note that I caught their attention when they stopped chewing and their jaws dropped."

In reading the book, I learned how Dr. Moltmann was conscripted into the German army, and how he was in charge of a big gun, trying to shoot down American bombers, and how he was shocked the day they showed him the pictures of what Hitler had done with the Holocaust and Jewish people. And how he was captured, and how he was a prisoner of war, and how in that prison camp, someone came in and gave him a Bible. He said, "We really would rather have had cigarettes, but they gave us Bibles," and how he read the 39th Psalm, where it said, "Oh Lord, what do I wait for? My hope is in you." And that did not become just a passage to be scanned. Jurgen Moltmann, German soldier, prisoner of war, ashamed of his nation, experiencing life at its worst, the ebb. The theologian who made a name for himself, coming out of that environment. He is the theology of hope. He is the one who says, "If you can see it coming, it's already arrived. Look."

Thomas Long wrote a book entitled, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, and in that book, at the very end of that book, there's this story about the obituary for Rabbi Hugo Gryn, who was one of the most respected rabbis in England. When Hugo was a boy, he and his family were imprisoned in Auschwitz. They were Orthodox. That put their existence in greater peril even. Hugo's father insisted they observe the Sabbath. Hugo remembered until the day he died, how his father took a piece of string and put it in a bit of butter, in order to make a Sabbath candle. Hugo protested, "Father, that's all the butter we have," he said. And his father responded by saying, "Without food, we can live for weeks. Without hope, we cannot live for another minute."

Pat Carroll remembers the day that she went to the grocery store and began to unload her groceries. The checkout clerk excused herself, saying she would be right back. Well, Pat continues to empty her groceries, and then this woman came in behind her with a basket. Noticing that there was no clerk, and seeing what Pat was doing, she said, "Is this checkout lane open, or are you just some kind of eternal optimist?" Hope means we are some kind of eternal optimist. It means we know we cannot live without hope. It means we can trust life, and the bounce-back that will come from the bad days, toward the good days. It takes hope to level out the ebb and the flow, and it's more than just a wish to be fulfilled. It's the kind of hope that is pro-active and provocative. It's the kind of hope that allows the future to take over the past and the present, that says what will be is more important than what has been, because we can do something about it. It's the kind of hope that brings it on as a self-fulfilling prophecy. It's what we cannot live without. Someone

said, "If hope is a rainbow after a storm, maybe we should start dancing in the rain." Hope is the one thing that will level out the ebb and flow. It's the only thing that will remind us, when things are going poorly, that there will be another day, that when the fires are burning, there will be a time to rebuild. When the times come to a bad end, there will be better times ahead. When budgets are tight, there will be abundance, because we will begin to count our blessings and realize we are blessed. It's all about hope, and the ebb and flow of life. It's all about faith in the light and dark of spirit. Faith, hope, and, you guessed it, love. Love.

Life is about lost and found. Jesus knew that. He spoke of people who knew about loss, and what they felt when they found what was lost. The shepherd whose flock was safe, except for one sheep, who nibbled his way lost. And he left his flock to find the sheep. Life is a lot of lost and found, and the way to face it is love.

A little boy at dinner told his parents there was to be a small PTA meeting at school the next day, and his mother said to her son, "Well, if it's a small meeting, do you think we ought to go?" And he said, "I think so. It's just you, me, and the principal." I think he was right. I think they'd better go. Jesus spoke of the prodigal son, the son who took his inheritance and left home and then came back. I read a story this week that's kind of like that, only it's the story of the prodigal father. It's Robert Fulghum. It's in his book, *From Beginning to End*. It's deeply personal. 52 years ago, he was 20. He was engaged to be married. It was announced at Christmas. The wedding was set for the following August. In the spring, the unthinkable happened. It was unthinkable. It was not thought out. She became pregnant. They hid this from their families. The decision would affect both of them the rest of their lives. They decided to have the baby, to give her up for adoption. Eventually they were married, but the marriage ended. Both remarried happily. This is what Robert Fulghum says about his daughter. "Over the years, my first wife and I each of us accustomed ourselves to the sorrows of the birth and the relinquishment of our first child. But the memory of that child did not fade. I found myself celebrating the child's birthday each year. It was a secret anniversary observed with a ritual walk alone. I was trying to imagine what the child was like, what she must be doing, where she must be living. I knew when she must be going to school, passing through puberty, entering high school, graduating, going out into the world, falling in love. I wanted to find her, but I felt that I had no right, that my appearance might be unwelcome. Or worse, that it could be damaging. What if she was in trouble? What if she had a troubled life? What if she needed me?"

"During the year when my book was published, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, the adoptive parents of my child read the book and they knew my name and enough about me to know who I was. One day the telephone call came. 'Are you Robert Fulghum?' 'Yes.' 'Did you put a child up for adoption in 1958?' 'Yes.' 'I think I'm your daughter.' She came the following Wednesday. Because I was arriving from being out of town on a trip, later that evening she was met at the airport by other members of my family. I came straight from the airport to my first wife's home. I parked a block away. I wanted, you know, some time to collect my thoughts. Instead, I got out of my car and I ran, and I ran as fast as I could run, and I rushed through the door into the living

room. I was the prodigal father. At the end of her first visit, we were parting, we were at a loss for words, and she took a piece of paper from off a desk and a pen, and she placed my hand on it, and she drew around my hand and fingers with the pen. Silently, she gave me the pen, and I place her hand on top of my hand and drew around hers, and we put our initials side by side, and we dated our drawing, and we hugged each other and we smiled and laughed and cried, and she was gone, back to her parents, back to her home, back to her life."

Lost and found. It's a part of what life brings us. We continue to lose, but we continue to find, if we're open to it. Not like the county agent found, when he went to a farm in his jurisdiction, talked to the farmer about matters of county business. Walking up the dirt road leading to the farm, he walked past three signs. The first one said, "Beware of dog." The second sign said, "Keep out - this means you!". The third one said, "Trespassers will be shot." The county agent and the farmer met. It was a friendly greeting, and the farmer was congenial, and when the agent was ready to leave, the farmer said to him, "Come and see me again some time. We don't really get many visitors up here." We've got to keep open. What makes us hold our lives together when there's been a death? To know that every loss has a find, that every defeat has a point of discovery, and that love will find a way.

Love will remind us that nothing that was, is ever lost, if it's sacred. Paul said it - "Love is the one thing that stands when all else has fallen." It takes love to face loss. And it's more than just "I love you." It's more than just "I love life." It's the kind of agape love that will the good of others is more important than our own. It's the deep love that gives and expects nothing back. It understands the grace of God, and feels compelled to share it, not hoard it. To forgive, and if possible forget, but always to remember what it is to be blessed, and how it is to be a blessing. If life's lost and found, there's love. Jesus knew that. Paul wrote about it, but Jesus knew it. Faith can light up the deepest dark. Hope can balance out the ebb and flow, and love can rediscover what is lost until it's found. Faith, hope, and love. If we have these three, then it really doesn't matter what happens. We can endure it, survive it, and thrive. And Jesus was right when he said, "The Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." It is as good as it gets.