



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“GOD’S TIMING AND OURS”

Scripture Lesson: Jeremiah 32

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, October 19, 2008.

At our Congregational Meeting this morning the members of First (Scots) will be offered a challenge to the effect that if we can meet certain criteria and achieve certain goals that we then move ahead with our plans for the demolition of Molly Wier Hall and the Annex behind it, the subsequent new construction of a fellowship and education center, and the remodeling of the Kirk House, the old educational building attached to the Sanctuary which houses our music ministry, and the renovation of our administrative areas. This is unquestionably a bold undertaking which will require, if approved, additional fundraising, additional sacrifices on the part of everyone and additional inconvenience during the construction phase as we position ourselves for more effective ministry in the years ahead.

Some of you know that these efforts have required years of patience, of numerous design changes, of multiple meetings with user groups and neighborhood groups, with the Board of Zoning Appeals and the Board of Architectural Review. Believe it or not, it was the recommendation of our officers at a retreat in the year 2001 that initiated this entire process it was clear even then that something had to be done to improve and expand our facilities. They were woefully inadequate then and are even more so today. Now, having received all of our major approvals, it is the time to fish or cut bait, as it were.

Of course, the primary concern in the mind of nearly everyone, is not whether we need to renovate and expand our facilities but rather whether the timing is right given the state of the economy and the feeling of financial uncertainty present in this country and beyond. In other words, while it is a worthwhile project, is now the time to move forward?

With this in mind I wish to share with you a reality and a truth from the scriptures that may speak to this issue, and may inform our approach to this demanding project. Of course, the congregation is free to do whatever it deems best, to accept the challenge that will be presented to it, to defer it until a more promising economic climate prevails, or even say no to the entire project. What makes our decision so crucial is that in my mind the decision will turn, not on the finances, not on the facilities purposed, but rather on the faith of our people. How so?

What is abundantly clear in the Bible is that God does not operate as we humans operate. His plans and purposes often seem strange and even run counter to our way of doing things. And God’s timing strikes us as odd, if not ridiculous quite often. Isaiah put it this way: “For my thoughts are not my thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9) It could not have been stated with greater clarity.

Now if you or I were God, we would not have done things as God chose to do them. If I wanted to create a people who would love me and obey me, I would not have allowed a tempter to

enter my garden and I would not have created my creatures with the power to make bad choices . . . not if I were God.

If I were God I wouldn't have chosen a rag tag band of godless, dysfunctional nomads with whom to enter into covenant. And if I wanted them to multiply and their decedents to be as numerous as the stars in the sky or the grains of sand along the seashore, I would not have selected Abraham at age 100 and Sarah at age 90 to be the most fertile choice for the nation I was creating . . . not if I were God.

If I were God and wanted to redeem my people from Egyptian captivity, I would have wanted a courageous, principled, charismatic, and articulate leader to take charge of them and to confront Pharaoh. But I would certainly not have called Moses ---- a fugitive from justice, an ex-murderer with a bad attitude and a speech impediment to be my spokes person . . . not if I were God.

If I were God and wanted a military commander to lead my people against the invading Midianites during the time of the judges, I would not have selected Gideon. He was, after all, the weakest member of the smallest tribe in Israel. Nor would I have had him reduce my army of 22,000 soldiers to a mere 300 men in order to take on 10,000 marauding Midianite soldiers who had invaded my country and who had the latest military equipment. No, I would not have done that if I were God.

What a way to run a world! The tactics and the timing that God uses make no sense at all unless . . . unless you want your people to understand that you are in control and they are not and . . . unless you want your people to know that their fate and their future depends wholly upon you, whether they know it or not and whether the like it or not.

The long passage which I read from Jeremiah 32 this morning is a wonderful illustration of how God's timing and God's tactics make no sense from a human perspective but are intended to underscore a profound truth. The prophet Jeremiah had been delivering a painful message of doom to Judah, to her kings and to the residents of Jerusalem. He had assured his people that God would judge them because of their sin, that their nation would be defeated by Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian forces and that they would be carried away into exile. By the time we get to chapter 32 Jeremiah himself has been arrested and is being kept under guard. The Babylonians have laid siege to Jerusalem and in a matter of months Jeremiah's prophecies of doom will be accomplished. Jeremiah takes no pleasure in delivering this word. No, he mourns with and for his people. It is a time of deep despair and gloom for God's people.

But suddenly a new word comes from the Lord to Jeremiah which could not have come at a worse time and which must have seemed at the time to make no sense at all . . . unless of course you are God and your people need reminding of a great truth. The Lord directs Jeremiah to buy a field that had belonged to his ancestors. Convinced by the unusually circumstances that this request was the will of God, Jeremiah proceeds to buy the field from a relative and then he prays to God for understanding of these incomprehensible instructions. Clearly God seems to have no comprehension of the real estate market, no understanding of financing, no grasp of the fact that you don't buy stock in a collapsing nation and you don't invest in what is about to be wholly destroyed. So none of this would have made sense of course, unless you are God and you want your people to invest in the truth that you are about to do an amazing and miraculous thing, unless you want your servants to understand that, as verses 17 & 27 put it, "Nothing is too hard for God."

The purchase of Jeremiah's field in the worst of times is God's way of assuring that following their punishment God's people will receive his blessing and they will prosper once again. He will bring them back from exile. He will enter into a new covenant with them. He will restore their land

and their fortune. Only God could make such an impossible thing happen, but then, is anything too hard for God? Sometimes God gives us a seemingly impossible task and a seemingly impossible mission so that we will recognize our complete dependence upon God and know for a fact that with God nothing is impossible.

So now move ahead from the Holy Land to the Holy City. From 588 BC to 2008 AD. Twenty-five centuries later God is still challenging his people to attempt the impossible and to do so in a time that just doesn't seem right. If we have to depend upon ourselves, we will surely fail. But if we depend upon God, is anything impossible?

In his recent study of the book of Judges, Dr. David Jeremiah asks a profound and provocative question: "What are you contemplating for God that is so outrageous, so great, that if it actually happens, he will be the only one who can get the credit?" (pg 106)

Like you, like Jeremiah, I do not always understand God's plans and purposes and I certainly don't understand God's timing. Why it has taken us some seven years to get from our planning stage to our fundraising and our implementation, I can not say. I know full well that our plans today are far superior to what was originally purposed. I know that in these seven long years we have been able to refine our plans and to relate better to neighborhood groups and community organizations. I know that this delay of many years has allowed us to accumulate and invest a significant amount of money previously pledged. I know that the economic uncertainties make sacrificial giving even more sacrificial in a time such as this. And that many capital campaigns are currently being put on hold. I also know that people who will contribute to our campaign out of accumulated assets rather than weekly pay checks may have few resources available. I also know that these economic hardships have reduced dramatically construction and material costs. And yet, I also know that nothing is impossible with God and that you and I, like our ancestors in the faith, need regular reminders of that truth. We also need to know that unless we attempt great things for God we should not expect great things from God.

This morning we will not be asking you to buy a field in a collapsing nation with a failed economy, but if we accept the challenge presented to us this day we will be asking you to invest in Christ's church in our own time and place, knowing that with God all things are possible and knowing that the church of Jesus Christ will be in this place serving future generations yet unborn because you and I in our time were found to be faithful.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.