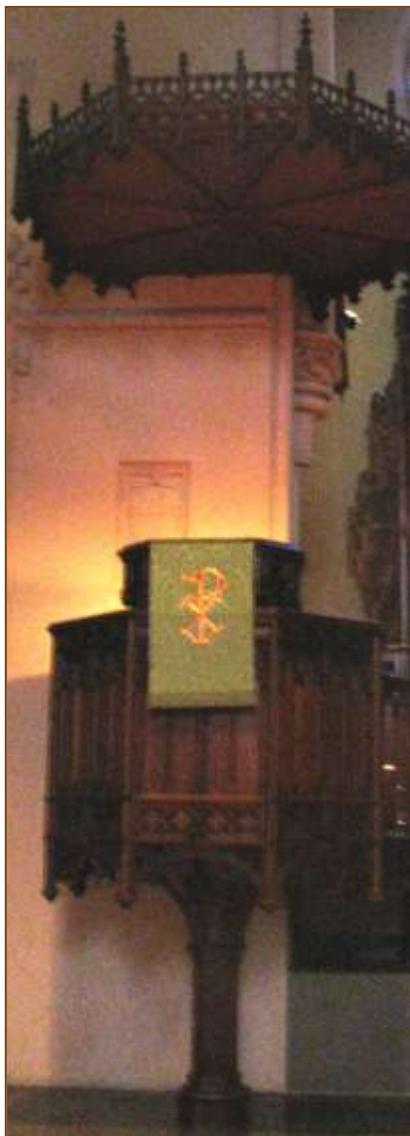


June 22, 2014

Sermons

from a church with a conscience



“Looking Over Jordan and
What Do I See?”

by

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What would it mean at this critical moment in human affairs did we in the churches show growing graces and services! A church with a conscience out in front of its age and outdistancing its own best past, in a sense of responsibility for an entire world, in its stand for economic justice, in its demand for, and illustration of, mutual honor and fellowship among races – a church with members whose convictions and characters were ahead of their contemporaries, so that it pulled them forward and lifted them Godward! Then both we on the inside and those on the outside would be in no doubt that Christ is alive and in the midst of His churches and is using them to guide and inspire the world.

Henry Sloane Coffin,
Preaching at the Church of the Covenant,
June 11, 1944

“Looking Over Jordan and What Do I See?”

Deuteronomy 34: 1-4

1 Corinthians 3 selected

“Old soldiers never die they just fade away”(1) from Vaughn Monroe’s ballad before MacArthur used it and these long goodbyes are something like that. So, count this as my last Sunday and see next week as one last encore bow. Like Moses I feel like I’m looking longingly over the Promised Land. That being exactly where we intended to go as we worked together to move this great church to be ready for her future, which you have now stepped gingerly into.

When Bill Coffin retired from Riverside Church in New York one of his final sermon titles was “Going To Do Something Worth Doing.” For me, that’s not the case; our time together on my end has been well worth the entire struggle, joy and sometimes pain. But now perhaps I’ll be a little freer to “play in the fields of the Lord” serving wherever God calls. Ordained for life, ministers never really retire but we often have to remind ourselves there are a lot of ways God can use us, which by the way is the same for each and every one of you. Retirement is not a condition of “self-hood,” it’s a context for selfhood as we try to adapt to new locations and circumstances. Emerson laid it on the line, “What lies behind and what lies ahead are tiny matters compared to what lies within.” It’s that which is within us that will define who we are.

So let’s think about poor old Moses because I think we can learn a lot from him about whom we are and the ways of the Lord. I love the spiritual Lynn Hoffman Engel just sang but I hope as I look over Jordan I don’t see any band of angels coming after me quite yet. I hope there are still “miles to go before I sleep.” That said, this account doesn’t really seem fair to modern thinking; Moses had completed all the course work but the Lord didn’t let him graduate. The chapter opens with a graphic tour of the land of hope and plenty as far as the eye could see. Moses had gotten the people through tough times and finally he stood on the edge of all he had worked for. Yet, his story ends with God saying, “I have let you see but you shall not go over there.”

Moses was destined to die in Moab; his burial place long forgotten like mighty pharaoh; his remains “dust upon the window sill.”

Years ago I started a successful ecumenical program for older adults. About ten years later I went back for a visit and discovered no one knew who I was. I never told them. I just enjoyed the results of everyone else’s labor. That’s the way it should be as I see it. Maybe that’s what spoke to me the other day when sitting in our library pondering the pictures of my predecessors and I realized that not one of them had gotten into the Promised Land they saw for this place. It’s a truth I use to lecture seminary students on, “It matters not if you’re in a church three years or thirty, you’re an interim. God has called people to a place before you and they will be doing God’s work long after you’re gone.” That’s what ministry is about. It’s what real leadership is about and most of all, it’s what following God’s ways and not our own are about. The wisdom writer strikes the epitaph for every minister that has stood in this or any pulpit. “It’s as though they had never been.”(2) Moses was given thirty days of mourning after which the people followed Joshua into their future. And by the way, he didn’t have an easy time of it either.

Which is another important learning not only for ministers but for members too. Paul puts us straight, “You’re acting like humans when one of you says, ‘I follow Paul,’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos.’ Who, after all, is Apollos and who is Paul? Where only servants, through whom you came to believe. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. We are but co-workers and you are God’s field, God’s building.” It’s the very soul of this thing called ministry that only gets messed up when people let themselves be human and ignore the fact that none of this is about any of us. It’s all about God!

As for the future, it’s never without ambiguity yet it’s always about possibility. That land, over which Moses looked as I now gaze, is forever a place of peril and promise. To think otherwise is to be a fool. Read the book of Joshua and you’ll find endless disappointments along with wonderful surprises. So while this might be an ending chapter of sorts it’s even more the beginning of another and another and another with each revealing new

blessings for those who are faithful and willing to listen for God's guidance. "(One) is most blessed over all mortals who loses no moment of this passing life in remembering the past." (3) That's why the view from the mountain top should remind you, as "People of God," that what you see is not always what you get but what you get is the opportunity to see and that the future for those who have deep enough faith is so extraordinary it exceeds all imagining. The Book of Revelation paints the picture. "For eye hath not seen nor ear heard the things prepared for those who love the Lord."

A close friend recently wrote a book about architecture and great places of worship. No single visionary ever saw those works completed. Building such a place takes the efforts of endless lives and lifetimes. I remember meeting a young stone cutter chiseling out gargoyles at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. "How long have you been at this?" I asked. "All my life" he replied. He had moved from Italy with his father after the death of his mother. They had a small workshop on the grounds. His father, following in his father's trade, had come as a young man. He had died several years before and now his son carried on. I suspect if he's alive he's still repairing gargoyles that have fallen to the ravages of time and weather. Builders, stone masons, carvers come and go never seeing their end product yet their visions of what's imagined have always kept them going.

As many of you know one of my favorite worship services happens on Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday when we have all those young men and women from the Cleveland School of the Arts. We conclude by singing "We Shall Overcome" and I can never hold my emotions in check. It's about where our world is and where it should and prayerfully one day will be. Maybe that's why on this occasion I'm mindful of Martin who also spoke of standing on the same mountain. He had a premonition of his pending end. He never saw the dream realized, but like Moses, he too caught that glimpse of what could be and spoke it loud and clear for all to hear. That is what these moments are all about.

It's never about arriving. It's always about the pilgrim's journey. You're never going to see the "promised land" just like I'm not, but if you're faith-filled, if you don't let the nay-sayers hold you back, and the hand-wringers

keep you from trusting God and not just yourselves, if you don't let the fair weather Christians get you down and if you have the courage to not listen to those gossip makers and blither blathers, always being willing to "stand and be counted," I can promise you that along with those builders, stone cutters, visionaries and all the saints of this church resting now in our columbarium and other places, you too will catch glimpses of what could and should be because it's the way God wants it to be!

Very few can orchestrate life's end even with the help of the "doctor deaths" of this world, we can't even determine what might occur an hour from now. Every one of us will move on one day with something left unfinished. Most people feel some sense of the incomplete when they retire, or when children leave the nest, or when we find ourselves at the edge of some other major change to our journeys. On occasion every life will seem a little unfair. But just because we can't control an end we can always trust in God's grace as we embrace new beginnings, and that is no small achievement!

When I left after twenty-four years of ministry in Washington, Pennsylvania I received a very official looking letter with the heading "Department of the Army." I didn't think I was getting drafted but it was clearly a puzzlement. It had come from a longtime friend and member and it read, "I felt compelled to send this not because we have always been in lock-step agreement but you always opened my eyes and mind and conscience. As you well know, "God alone is Lord of the conscience" and you made us work at it! So this is an official letter providing you with the title "Harbor Master of the Lighthouse on College and Wheeling streets." Hopefully you will do the same as the "Harbor Master of a Lighthouse on Euclid Avenue." Then he concluded, "We have a saying at the corps of engineers, 'Eassayons,' meaning 'let us try.'"

We have tried, and now I remind you one last time, that the very nature of faith is a life lived in that "state of the incomplete" as we all struggle to recognize that we will forever be sojourners walking "those lonesome valleys," sometimes feeling by ourselves, because it's only by traveling over those hills and through those valley's that we reach that resting place our faith tells us is waiting. So it is I say to you now, may all of your views from your mountain tops be as special as the ones I have had the privilege to see as

I look upon where you have the potential to one day be. May you always be
“a Lighthouse on Euclid Avenue” for all who come by your doors.

“Eassayons,” “Eassayons!”

- 1) General Douglas MacArthur, “Old Soldiers Never Die” Ballad by
Vaughn Monroe
- 2) Ecclesiasticus 44:9
- 3) Henry David Thoreau



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Convinced of God's grace, the Church of the Covenant strives to be a caring and compassionate congregation, welcoming all people regardless of age, race, national origin, marital status, gender, affectional orientation, and mental or physical ability.