

# “The Power to See It Through”

a sermon by

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Text: “And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet’ (Ezekiel 2:2).

This past week someone sent me an article written by Craig Barnes, who was our Willard Lecturer this past year. It was an address given by Craig to a group of ministers and it was entitled “Sometimes Ministry Stinks.” In that address, he related a time in his own ministry when he was tired and discouraged. He went to visit Dr. Bryant Kirkland, who for many years was the minister of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. Kirkland told this young minister of a time when Kirkland’s wife was in the hospital, having given birth to one of their children. Dr. Kirkland was impressed with the quality of the service in the hospital, particularly by the nurses who attended his wife. When he commented about this to the head nurse, she explained that the hospital trained all of its own nurses. “We tell them,” she said, “that there are a lot of smelly jobs in our profession, but every job can be conducted with dignity. Our motto is this: ‘If you get stuck holding the bedpan, carry it like a queen.’” Then the focus isn’t on the bedpan but on the graciousness of the one holding it.”

In pastoral ministry, Craig Barnes pointed out, there are a lot of smelly jobs. Sometimes someone has to fire unproductive staff members, meet with chronic complainers, wade into conflicts between different factions, and represent unpopular changes that are necessary. These are smelly jobs and sometimes the person who has to do it is the one person who is being paid to come to church. Moreover, churches, believe it or not, sometimes attract odd people. As one seminary professor put it, "If you want to be the light of the world, you have to expect to attract a few moths."

This is true, of course, not only for ministers but also for all of us in the church. Sometimes as Christians we are called to do things that are important and necessary, but are not glamorous. Much of the work of this church is done by people who work hard with little or no recognition. They sing in the choir, unload trucks for Loaves and Fishes, spend the night at the church with homeless families, tutor disadvantaged children, teach Sunday school, and do a host of other things.

This is a part of our calling, but we are not the first ones to experience this call.

## I.

Long ago, a prophet by the name of Ezekiel found himself facing a difficult situation. As a youth, he had been in the city of Jerusalem, when the Babylonians came down on the city, utterly destroying it and taking the king and many of the citizens of Jerusalem into exile into Babylon. Ezekiel spent his ministry in the city of Babylon, moving in the midst of a people who had largely given up hope. There he was, an exile in the midst of the oppressive splendor of his conquerors, his own people uprooted, rejected, whipped and wretched. But something happened to Ezekiel that forever etched his name in human history. He became one of the major creators of the new Judaism, helping to make possible at last the return from exile, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and the beginning of a new chapter in the life of the people of God. "The Spirit," said Ezekiel, "entered into me and set me on my feet."

One of the most important aspects of the life of faith is the capacity to see a job to completion. Sometimes, like Ezekiel, we are called to confront despair, hopelessness, and uncertainty and the major challenge before us is whether we have the power to see it through. When the great composer Handel was in the process of writing his masterpiece, *Messiah*, his biographer tells us that his health and fortune had reached their lowest ebb. His right side was paralyzed. His money was gone. His creditors seized him and threatened him with imprisonment. For a brief time, Handel was tempted with giving up. But he rebounded and he has left us the magnificent "*Hallelujah Chorus*" as his legacy. So, in what seemed like a hopeless situation, The Spirit entered into him and set him on his feet.

This morning we are very much aware that we face great challenges. We are a divided nation in the midst of an unpopular war facing an election that will have an enormous impact on

the future of this nation. So what is it that allows The Spirit to come upon a person that sets that person on his feet?

## II.

Well, for one thing Ezekiel started by confronting himself. Though centuries separate us from this great prophet, there is a sense in which we know Ezekiel well. He had every reason to give up. He was in a terrible situation. He had hours of self-pity. He had moods of resentment. He had hours of bewilderment, when he rebelliously cursed the world and the day he was born. He had moods of discouragement, black melancholy, into which he fell as into an abyss. But he had something else as well. The Spirit of God came into him and set him on his feet.

This past week our nation mourned the death of Christopher Reeves, a well-known actor who suffered a terrible spinal chord injury nine years ago and who fought valiantly against the terrible paralysis that affected most of his body. He acknowledged that there were times when he was tempted to give up, but something kept him going.

So often we see two philosophies of life that fight one another. One is determinism that affirms that heredity and environment decide everything we are or do. The other philosophy is free will that says that we can do anything we choose. Either one by itself is false. Determinism is not the whole truth; heredity and environment do not decide everything. And free will in the absolute sense is not true either; we cannot do everything we choose. These two insights have somehow to be combined for us to see the real truth. But when heredity and environment have done their worst there still remains in a person the power to stand face to face with some difficult situation and overcome it. "The Spirit entered me," said Ezekiel, "and set me on my feet."

## III.

Then, too, something else happened in Ezekiel. He saw that difficult and adverse situations could call out something from a person that pleasant and prosperous situations can never do. He saw that God was calling him to service, not despite the exile, but because of it.

The same is true of churches. Throughout its history First Presbyterian Church has faced enormous challenges: the devastation of the aftermath of the Civil War; the collapse of downtown Charlotte in the 1950s and 1960s; the challenge of integration and school busing; the increase of street people and homelessness in the center city. In recent years we have faced the challenge of purchasing the Poplar/Pine Street property, coping with a changing neighborhood and a host of other situations.

This morning we face a different kind of challenge. Over the past several years we have not had sufficient response of pledges to fund the operating budget of our church. In the late 1990s the church enjoyed a series of years where there were surpluses available to fund the operating budget of the church. Today, these surpluses do not exist.

Giving to the church is sometimes like carrying a bedpan. It is not always easy. It is not always glamorous. Yet, it is essential to the church's ministry. The operating budget of our church is the engine that drives everything we do. If it is strong, the church is strong. If it struggles, the church struggles. That is why it is important for us to meet the challenge of the Stewardship Campaign for 2005.

All of us are aware that we live in difficult economic times. Our nation is at war with Iraq. Many companies are in the process of downsizing workers and outsourcing jobs. For many the future is very uncertain. Yet, the reality is that difficult situations bring out the best in churches, even as they bring out the best in individuals. No wilderness, no Moses! No exile, no Ezekiel! No cross, no Christ! How can a person be a disciple of Jesus Christ without knowing that we are being challenged in all parts of our lives?

#### IV.

But Ezekiel persevered for yet another reason. He was convinced that the God he served was a living god who brought life from death. One of the saddest of all the Psalms, Psalm 137. In that Psalm the writer raises the most powerful questions of the exile: "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (Psalm 137.3).

Some years ago Ernest Gordon wrote a book, entitled *To End all Wars*. It was an autobiographical account of his experience as a British Army officer who was captured by the Japanese during World War II and assigned to the building of the Burma-Siam railway. It was a very debilitating situation in which over 80,000 prisoners ultimately died. Gordon himself almost died. He suffered from a combination of beriberi, worms, dysentery, typhoid and diphtheria.

For the most part the prison camp served as a laboratory of the survival of the fittest. Men lived like animals, fighting one another for food and water. Until one day something profound happened that transformed that prison camp. Gordon later called it the "miracle on the River Kwai." One day a Japanese guard discovered a shovel was missing. When no one confessed to the theft, the guard cried that he was going to kill all the prisoners. At that instant one of the prisoners stepped forward and said, "I did it." Enraged, the guard lifted his weapon high in the air and bringing the rifle butt on the prisoner's skull, killed him with one blow. That evening when the tools were counted again, it was discovered that a mistake had been made. No shovel was missing.

All of a sudden, Gordon writes, there was a profound change in the camp. One of the prisoners remembered the verse in the New Testament, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Suddenly, attitudes in the camp began to change. Prisoners began to look after one another instead of living in competition. When the war finally came to an end and the prison camp was liberated, the prisoners treated the sadistic guard with kindness and not revenge.

Ernest Gordon's own life took an unexpected turn. He enrolled in seminary and became a Presbyterian minister, serving as Dean of the Chapel and Princeton University.

The miracle on the river Kwai was no less than the creation of an alternate community, a tiny settlement of the kingdom of God taking root in the least likely soil. For them God was more certain than death.

The experience of Ezekiel is precisely the experience that we long for today. The Spirit entered into him. He did not get it by willing it along but by receiving it. There is nothing more important for our lives and for our church than to open ourselves to the resources of the spirit that are greater than ourselves. "The water that I give," said Jesus, "shall be in you a well of water springing up."

May God give us wisdom and courage for the living of these days!  
Amen!