

# “Making the Best Out of a Bad Situation”

a sermon by

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Text: “I left you behind in Crete for this reason, so that you should put in order what remained to be done...” (Titus 1:5).

One of the surprise movies of the summer is the movie “The March of the Penguins.” In a time in which most successful movies are action blockbusters with huge budgets, this movie is more like a documentary. It only took \$1 million dollars to produce it and it has already grossed \$26 million dollars at the box office. The movie tells the story of the remarkable lives of the Emperor penguins in Antarctica. Watching that movie this week I was moved not only by the beautiful photography and stark wonder of the southernmost part of our planet, but also by the sheer power of determination that these remarkable birds have to maintain life in the most difficult circumstances imagined. The average daily temperature in Antarctica is 58 degrees minus zero. The winters are vicious. No one is quite sure what compelled these birds to remain in this domain after the continent changed from a tropical paradise to a frozen tundra. But stay they did. As the movie documents their lives, it is an incredible story of how a species gathers food, gives birth to new life, and maintains itself in a situation that we can hardly imagine.

## I.

There is a text in Paul's letter to his friend Titus that has always caught my imagination. Paul, so the record has it, had left Titus on the great island of Crete in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Apparently, this was not a very pleasant place to be. The situation is summed up in one blistering verse of this letter. "It was one of them," says Paul, "their very own prophet, who said, "Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, and lazy gluttons. That testimony is true." That is Paul's summary of the situation in Crete.

But listen to him as he writes to Titus: "For this reason I left you behind in Crete, so that you should put in order what remained to be done" (Titus 1:5).

That seems like a strange reason for leaving a person in Crete, that the Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, and idle gluttons. It sounds like a good reason for getting out of Crete. But Paul was no ordinary person. He never backed away from a difficult situation or a great challenge. There is in this assessment something that smacks of Christianity at its best: Crete--a hard place; the Cretans--a bad lot. "For this reason I left you in Crete."

Now, I believe that the experience of Titus is one with which many of us can identify. We have all been to Crete; we are all going to be in Crete, and probably a good number of us are there today. Crete is a situation that seems hopeless. It can be a dead-end job or a family situation that seems overwhelming. It can be a medical situation that seems to offer no real hope of recovery. The reality is that when we find ourselves in this kind of situation we want out. Can you imagine what Titus thought, when after pouring his heart out about how bad Crete was, he received this message: "For this reason I have left you in Crete." So, what happens to a person when he or she finds himself or herself in a bad situation?

## II.

One of the things that we sometimes discover is that difficult situations can be the occasion in which people find their real vocation. When Titus found himself in Crete, he must have felt his life was over. After all the Cretans were "liars, brutes, and gluttons." How in the world does a person have a ministry in a place that that?

Some years ago I had the opportunity to visit the Island of Crete. It is a beautiful gem in the midst of the Mediterranean. One of the things that impressed me was the archaeological excavations that were going on in Crete. They were excavating the foundations of beautiful churches that dated back to the time of the Roman Empire. Out of Crete came a number of teachers, preachers, and missionaries who fought mightily against the paganism of the Roman Empire. Whose name was on those churches? Titus! Whose shrines were built there? Titus! Saint Titus! In the very place from which he wanted to flee he found something he would have never expected--an opportunity to make a powerful witness for the Christian faith. Paul was right. "I left you behind in Crete for this reason, so that you should put in order what remained to be done...." (Titus 1:5).

Surely, this is a principle that runs through life. Life is not just what we find; it is what we created. Many people wander through life never understanding this. Existence is what you find; life is what you create.

This summer I had the chance to read David McCullough's wonderful book 1776. It is the story of that critical year in the life of our nation when the War of Independence began. It was the year of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Most of us look back on that year as if it were a year of glorious victories. As McCullough points out, it was anything but easy. When George Washington took charge of the Continental Army, he found an army that was unfed, unclothed, and undisciplined. In his letters to his wife Martha he expressed his great dismay that there was any hope for victory against an overwhelming British army. And yet, out of that great struggle came the birth of a nation "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

There is a sense in which all of us are faced with the same struggle that faced Titus in Crete. So often we are dealt a hand that seems unfair. So often we face situations we would have never imagined or chosen. That is why each of us needs to search our souls to see if we can find what Titus found: a great faith, a firm conviction, and inward power.

### III.

Then, too, there is something else about Titus' experience in Crete. This principle of making the best of difficult situations is not only a common human situation; it is at the heart of our faith as Christians. There is no use of pretending to be a disciple of Jesus Christ if we are unwilling to stay in Crete because it is difficult. Jesus belongs in Crete. He particularly belongs in Crete. He belongs in Crete not in spite of the fact that Cretans are liars, beasts, gluttons, but because they are. "This man receives sinners, and eats with them." said Jesus' enemies. He was always trying to discover Crete. That was always one of the annoying things about Jesus. "I came," he said, "not to call the righteous, but sinners."

There is something very powerful about the ability of a person to take a terrible situation and make of it something noble. Gary Wills in his book, Lincoln at Gettysburg, makes the point that in the 272 words that Abraham Lincoln spoke in November of 1863 he offered the American people the opportunity to move beyond a terrible war to a new future.

The Battle of Gettysburg was a disaster in almost every sense of that word. Fifty Thousand soldiers were killed there in battle. It was one of the worst carnages in American history.

Not even all the gallantry of General Robert E. Lee could redeem his foolhardiness at Gettysburg. When in doubt, he charged into the cannon's mouth by proxy. Ordered afterward to assemble the ruins of that doomed assault, General George Pickett told Lee that he had no force to reassemble. Lee offered Jefferson Davis his resignation.

Nor did Major General Meade, Lee's opposite number, leave Gettysburg in glory. Though he had lost as many men as had Lee, he had the opportunity to capture the Confederate Army, but failed to take advantage of that opportunity. He, too, offered his resignation.

When Lincoln arrived at Gettysburg, he was not even the featured speaker. That honor was reserved for Edward Everett. Lincoln's presence was somewhat of an afterthought. But the opportunity was not lost on Lincoln. Everett spoke for over an hour. Lincoln spoke for three minutes. Yet, in those three minutes he lifted the eyes of a nation above the carnage and division of war to the possibility of reconciliation.

Through the years historians have struggled to understand Abraham Lincoln's great contribution to this nation. In many ways he seems a very unlikely candidate for greatness. He had failed in business and in politics. His wife, Mary, was a very troubled woman and Lincoln himself struggled with depression and sudden mood changes. And, yet, in the darkest hour of our history he was the one person who was able to take a terrible situation and make of it something very great.

#### IV.

Then, too, if a person is going to make the best of a terrible situation, it will be because he or she discovered a faith in God that gave the power to see that person through. Perhaps we have not been fair to Titus. He was in a difficult spot. The citizens of Crete were liars, beasts, and gluttons. He had every reason to want to get out of Crete and none of us would have blamed him if he had left. But he didn't. He stayed and in doing so he fulfilled the words of Paul: "For this reason I have left you in Crete."

It is always easier to denounce something than to build something. Consider the church, for example. Many people today criticize the church. Several weeks ago the Charlotte Observer ran an article on "Why People Don't Go to Church Today." Most of us could have written that article. We know the reasons. The church has failed in many ways. Often it seems little more than a pale reflection of the society around it. People today in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are angry about many things. Some are angry because it is too conservative; others because it is too liberal. It isn't difficult to criticize the church. It is a very human institution. But it is something more than that, it is also the 'body of Christ' and because it is the "body of Christ," it is our responsibility not to complain about it "but to set in order the things that need to be done."

As I have said before, I believe that First Presbyterian Church is facing one of the greatest opportunities we have ever faced. The face of Uptown is changing. A new basketball arena will be complete in the next several months, as will ImaginOn: the Joe and Joan Martin Center, combining the resources of the Children's library and the Children's Theater. Moreover, there are few churches, if any, in this city that have the capacity to influence the entire shape of this city.

There are those who look at the city of Charlotte in the same way Titus looked at Crete. Charlotte, they say, can't make its schools work, can't create racial harmony, can't solve the growing disparity solve the great divide between rich and poor.

That sounds like a good reason to get out of Charlotte. But that is not our charge. Our charge is to transform it, 'that we may put into order what remains to be done.'

Amen!