

“The Supreme Test of Religion”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
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Text: “If the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!”(Matthew 6:23b).

Over the last several weeks our nation has been shattered by events both at home and abroad. This past week we witnessed an earthquake in Pakistan that took the lives of almost 40,000 people, bringing death and suffering to so many people ill equipped to deal with such an overwhelming disaster.

Six weeks ago we experienced this kind of natural disaster on our own shores as Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita ravaged much of the Gulf Coast. But it wasn't just the power of Hurricane Katrina that left so many people shaken. It was also the lack of response to this tragedy. From the President of the United States, to the Governor of Louisiana, to the Mayor of New Orleans, to the head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), it appeared that no one was in charge.

As one commentator observed, Hurricane Katrina not only took the roofs of the homes in Louisiana and Mississippi, it also took off the roof of the easy assumptions in our country today that we can fight a war in Iraq and Afghanistan, lower taxes, continue to consume gasoline at frightening levels, and pay for the consequences of these natural disasters without driving our nation into a crippling national debt.

For the first time since September 11, 2001, we are a nation that is frightened: frightened by a fear of the future and uncertain whether we have the means and the resolve to meet the challenges that face us.

In times like these we turn to one of the most basic aspects of the Christian religion, the power of faith to bring the essentials of confidence and hope to our lives and the life of our nation.

I.

There is no more important word in the Christian language than the word “faith.” Faith is basic to all views of life. Everyone has it; no one is without it. The word ‘faith’ appears so often in the New Testament that the allusions come crowding close to one another:

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen.”

“Being therefore justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”

“Your faith has made you well.”

“This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith.”

In all of these passages there is a note of assurance, active commitment, and resolute conquest. In a time in which so many people are struggling to understand the great natural disasters both in this country and in Pakistan, faith is one of the major requirements for creative living in our time.

II.

In the first place Christianity has always flourished far better in difficult times than in easy times. That first Christian, Jesus of Nazareth, lived in difficult times. The early Christian community that bore his name won its amazing victory against the opposition of a pagan world and established itself amid the ruins of a collapsed empire and wrecked civilization.

Oftentimes we look at the great Protestant Reformation of the 16th Century as a time of glorious faith, but it was a difficult time. Listen to the Reformer John Calvin speaking of the church in his time: “Their wickedness has, however, reached such a pitch, that I hardly hope to be able any longer to retain any kind of position for the church, especially under my ministry. My influence is gone, believe me, unless God stretch forth his hand.”

Whatever one might say about the historic Christian faith, one may not claim that it has failed to grapple with tragedy. The symbol of Christianity is the cross. Christianity started with tragedy, took tragedy for its very password and countersign. Open the New Testament anywhere and you will find, not so much idealistic dreamers as men and women who, as the Letter to the

Hebrews says, were stoned, sawn asunder, tempted, slain with the sword, going about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, afflicted, ill treated, of whom the world was not worthy.

Throughout the history of the church you will find Christians grappling with tragedy--sometimes causing tragedy, often suffering tragedy but, at its best, learning from tragedy. Jesus said, "In this world you will have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."

This morning we come to Dedication Sunday at First Presbyterian Church. This is the Sunday on which we ask each member present to come and to place his or her pledge card on the communion table as a commitment to the work of Christ in this place. This is not an easy time for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Our denomination is suffering a massive membership loss. There are divisive issues that threaten to tear the fabric of the church in two.

At First Presbyterian Church we face our own challenges. We are part of an urban community that is struggling to support a school system, dealing with increasing poverty and homelessness. One of the challenges facing our church is the question of the response we will make to a growing uptown. There are five new condominium towers being built around us. Over the next several years we will have a magnificent opportunity to minister to hundreds of families who live just a block or two from us. The session of our church is in the process of appointing a Space Committee to study the space needs of our church for the future. In addition, we are asking another committee to look at possible uses of the Poplar/Pine Street property that constitutes our parking lot.

First Presbyterian Church has a unique ministry in Charlotte. We sponsor both a Child Development Center and a Weekday School. We also sponsor a Television Ministry that reaches approximately 25,000 viewers each week. In addition we sponsor over 35 community ministries. The engine, however, that drives all of these ministries is the operating budget of the church. This year our Stewardship Committee has challenged us to a seven per cent increase. If our operating budget is not strong, our church will not be strong. That is why it is important for each one of us to commit ourselves to the support of this church for 2006.

III.

Then, too, difficult times offer us an opportunity to catch a fresh vision of what it means to follow Jesus Christ. There is something puzzling about the fact that great faith and great lives inevitably come out of great suffering and great challenges. I do not know why that is so, but I do know it is so. One of the great religious figures of the world is Gautama Buddha. He was raised in a palace with wealth and splendor. But one day he encountered the suffering of his people and it changed his life forever.

The Jewish faith began in a similar fashion. Moses was raised in the palace of the Pharaoh. But one day he saw one his fellow Israelites being beaten by an Egyptian taskmaster. So, in anger Moses killed the Egyptian and his life was forever changed.

That is true of all of the great faiths of the world. They have all been born out of tribulation. As for our faith, without a cross there is no Christianity.

This past year I read with interest a new biography, *Martin Luther*, written by Martin Marty, who has taught Church History at the University of Chicago for a number of years. Marty points out that there are a number of caricatures of Martin Luther. Some saw him as anti-Semitic in his treatment of the Jews. Others saw in him a man more fearful of anarchy than authoritarianism so that when the peasants began to read the Bible and to resist the authority of the nobles, Luther sided with the nobles who were more than happy to smite and stab the peasants. Martin Marty finally concluded that the real Luther was far more than any of these caricatures. He was a wrestler with God: God present and God absent, God too near and God too far, the God of wrath and the God of love, God weak and God almighty, God real and God as illusion, God hidden and God revealed.

There are not many individuals about whom one might say they changed the course of Western Civilization, but Martin Luther is one of them. He challenged both Pope and Emperor. He translated the Bible from Latin into German, forever giving access of God's word to ordinary people. He shattered the monastic life of celibacy when he, a priest, married Katherine von Bora. He wrote hymns and organized congregations. On more than one occasion he fled for his life, often being shuttled from castle to castle to protect him from his enemies. He was, as Marty points out, a man who had influence in politics, education, economics, and the arts. But, fundamentally he was a person struggling with God to find a way for a sinner to stand in the presence of a righteous God and that was his greatest accomplishment.

IV.

Then, too, times of great challenge have always been the occasion for individuals to find their great confidence in the power of God to bring light out of even the darkest situations. Several years ago I came across a biography of Winston Churchill by William Manchester entitled *The Last Lion: Alone: 1932-1940*. In this book Manchester unfolds the events in the years preceding the outbreak of World War II in 1940. In those fateful years Winston Churchill was the single voice in Great Britain warning his people about the events unfolding in Germany with the rise of Adolph Hitler and National Socialism. Churchill referred to those years as the "wilderness years." He was truly alone. He was laughed at, ignored, ridiculed, and isolated. But when in May 1940 France and the Low Countries fell to Hitler's advance the King of England, George VI, summoned Churchill to Buckingham Palace to offer him the opportunity to form a cabinet and to lead his people as Prime minister of Great Britain. The King summoned Churchill to the Palace that evening because he knew that Churchill was the one and only man in England who could possibly unite his people and stay the hand of disaster.

On his way to the War Office that evening Churchill remarked to his driver that he believed that every event in his life had prepared him for this experience: every disappointment, every rejection, every ridicule.

I wonder how many of us can look back at our own life and say the same thing; namely, that somehow the events of our lives were not random but that everything that has happened to us--bad and good--is nothing more or less than God's preparation for us to do what he placed us on this earth to do?

Jesus said to his disciples, "You are the light of the world." Surely there is no more important task for us today than to let our light shine so that women and men may see that light and give glory to God in heaven.

Amen