

“The Fourth Quarter”

a sermon by

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Text: “...for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.”(II Timothy 4:9-18)

This is a time of year when there is a lot of emphasis on sports—particularly basketball and football. Some of you know me well enough to know that I have a particular affection not only for the Carolina Panthers and Davidson basketball, but also for the New York Yankees. In fact, as a Yankees fan, I was very encouraged two weeks ago that the New York Yankees were willing to pay four hundred million dollars for two pitchers and a hitter. With that kind of money, it occurred to me that the Yankees should have bailed out Wall Street instead of the United States Government having to do so.

This past week, I read with interest an interview with Coach John Fox of the Carolina Panthers. Apparently, there had been a good bit of criticism over the past weeks about the way the team had played in the last quarter of the game, losing to New York in a playoff and then winning last week in New Orleans. I thought Coach Fox handled himself well by saying that the Panthers have played some very good teams over the past several weeks and he was more than proud of the team’s accomplishment.

It did lead me to think more carefully about the “Fourth Quarter” not just in football, but in life. Life in the fourth quarter, as in a football game, is determined by what has happened in the first, second, and third quarters. On the other hand, the first, second, and third quarters can make the fourth quarter a time of real achievement. As good strategy in life, as in a football game, is to prepare in the early quarters for the fourth.

I.

There is a particular individual in the New Testament who is mentioned only three times, but who has always held a lot of fascination for me. His name is Demas, and alas, many of us are probably more like him than some of the great New Testament figures we know quite well. First, in Paul’s letter to Philemon, we read, “Demas, Luke, my fellow workers” (Philemon 24). In this

case, Paul mentions Luke and Demas as two of the people for whom he had high regard. The second instance in which Demas is mentioned is in the Book of Colossians where Paul refers to “Luke the beloved Physician, and Demas” (Colossians 4:14). Reading that, I wondered if perhaps by this time Luke had risen in Paul’s estimation and Demas had perhaps slipped. The third mentioning of Demas comes in II Timothy, where Paul, now at the end of his life, wrote these words, “For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica” (II Timothy 4:9).

This is the story of a person who made a great start and a poor finish. It is almost as if a person could plot three points on a graph: “Demas, my fellow worker;” “Demas;” “Demas deserted me.”

II.

This Sunday marks the beginning of a New Year. There is something invigorating about a New Year. It offers a new start, and chance to begin again, the opportunity to put the past behind us and to begin again.

Demas represents a different perspective. Here is a man who made a great start but who was not able to make a good finish. Perhaps it was Demas that Luke had in mind when he included in his gospel the saying of Jesus about a man who built a tower without counting the cost. The man was able to begin a great project, but he was not able to finish it.

You see, I think there is a little of Demas in all of us. So often we make New Year’s resolutions only to see them crumble in a few weeks. So often, in looking back at our lives, we see how our faith—once strong—has eroded over time. We know Demas. The mirror reveals him to us. He lived nearly two thousand years ago, but he is still with us. “Demas, my fellow worker;” “Demas;” “Demas deserted me, having loved this present age.”

So, what are the qualities that make for not just a good start, but for a good finish as well?

III.

For one thing, staying power is always associated with a certain capacity for integrity and conscience. This past week, I came across an article by Michael Lewis that appeared in *Portfolio Magazine*, in which the author gave credit to two financial analysts, Meredith Whitney and Steve Eisman, who understood early on that the U.S. financial system had turned into a doomsday machine. Whitney announced early on that Citigroup was in a ton of trouble. Eisman stood up in the middle of a speech by a mortgage company C. E. O. to tell him that his default rates were about to be astronomical.

Now, as we see Paul and Demas in Rome, it is obvious that Paul has that kind of conscience. He would have liked outward fortune and success—could he have had them on honorable terms. But one thing was sure. He was not going to break faith with himself or with Christ.

Demas, however, was another sort. He soon found something else that was indispensable. “Demas deserted me,” wrote Paul, “having loved the present age.” So that was it! Roman civilization was brilliant, like our own. It had its ugly aspects, but for agile minds and grasping hands there were prizes to be gained.

Over the past weeks most of us have read with a great deal of disgust the activities of Rod Blagojevich, the governor of Illinois, who was taped in telephone conversations about the possibility of selling the vacant seat in the U.S. Senate to the highest bidder. In many ways, the governor of Illinois is not anything new to American politics. But he does represent something that is very dangerous—the total disregard of personal ethics in favor of private gain.

You see, I am not talking about Demas but about us. No one needs to be a failure. Look at Paul. He is writing this letter from prison. Soon his life will be over. But listen to his words: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have kept the faith.” Paul had faced many failures. But he was not a failure.

IV.

Then, too, staying power is always associated with being captured by something greater than oneself, being identified with a cause, a vocation, a social reform that we regard greater than ourselves. That is a common trait of all those individuals we deem to be great—Chopin in music, Socrates in philosophy, Abraham Lincoln as a statesman. They all cared for something greater than themselves, something to which they gave their long-term commitment. All staying power in character is associated with that.

There is a fascinating contrast between two phrases in the New Testament. The first is Paul’s description of Demas— “having loved this present age.” The second is the description of a true Christian that is found in the Epistle to the Hebrews as one “who has tasted the powers of the age to come.” So, that is the difference, as the New Testament sees it. An apostate is in love with the present age. The Christian is one who has been laid low by the powers and hopes of the age to come.

As a minister, sometimes I see individuals who join our church. At the beginning, they brim with enthusiasm and energy. But as time goes on, they settle into a comfortable and formal kind of faith. You see, all of us find it easy to fall in love with this present age. And if I should accuse some of you as being Judas Iscariot, you would be indignant. You would never deliberately sell out some one. But Demas—how many of us have been that?

I mentioned a few minutes ago the article by Michael Lewis entitled “The End.” In his book *Liar’s Poker*, Lewis relates his experience on Wall Street in the 1980’s, working for Salomon Brothers. He had never taken an accounting course, never run a business, and never even had any savings of his own to manage. He figured his situation was unsustainable. Sooner or later he figured that someone was going to identify him as a fraud. Sooner or later he believed there would be a great reckoning when Wall Street would wake up and hundreds, if not thousands of young people like him who had no business making huge bets with other people’s money would be expelled from finance.

There is something to the fourth quarter. Of all the crazy things in human history, could you have thought about anything any stranger than Nero on the throne and Paul in prison, that the gospel for which Paul stood would outlast and wear down the empire? That is what got to Demas—the great power of Rome versus the seeming weakness of the Christian gospel. Who would have ever imagined that Paul would have outlasted Nero, but that is exactly what happened and that is what always happens.

May God give us the strength and power to see it through.

Amen!