

“Firm Words and Feeble Knees”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
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Text: “Your words have supported those who were stumbling, and you have made firm the feeble knees.” (Job 4:4)

Most of us are quite aware that yesterday was Halloween. We may have a vague awareness that today is All Saints Day, a time when the church celebrates the lives of all the faithful who have lived in all times and places.

We may not, however, be aware that yesterday had another significance besides being “All Hallows Eve” – the evening before All Saints Day, or as we call it Halloween. Yesterday marked another religious holiday, known as Samhain, which is the autumnal New Year for a religion known as Paganism.

Paganism, which has been around for quite a while, is a religion that celebrates the vitalities of nature. It is particularly popular on college and university campus where the use and abuse of alcohol is so popular and where there are little, if any, prohibitions about permissive sexual behavior.

A sociologist, Helen Berger, estimates that there are between 500,000 and one million Americans who identify themselves as Pagans. In more recent years, there has been a renewed interest in paganism and its fascination with witches, the occult, with the popularity and fame of Harry Potter books and with the obsession in our culture with vampires.

Because we live in a society where there are so many different religious options and expressions, I wonder sometime how a person is able to keep one’s bearings amidst such constant change.

I.

There is a passage in the Book of Job that comes to mind when I think of how a person is able to keep his footing in such a slippery time.

The Book of Job, as everyone knows, is a series of speeches, exchanges between Job and his three friends, Bildad, Eliphaz, and Zophar. These are the three people who came to comfort him when he lost his family, his wealth, and when his health had completely failed him, placing him outside the city with sores covering his body.

The driving theme in the Book of Job is the question of why innocent people suffer. Traditional wisdom in Israel had identified a certain notion that suffering and sin were intimately connect. Sin resulted in suffering, declared the Book of Deuteronomy. Therefore every one concluded that the converse was true as well. If a person was suffering, it was the result of sin. That is the point that these three so-called friends of Job were trying to drive home. The poetic sections of the book, which compose the overwhelming part of this book, are exchanges between Job and these three friends. Job insists that he is innocent. His friends insist that he is guilty of sin. Otherwise, they argue, he would never have suffered such a terrible calamity.

The text for today is part of the first speech given by one of these three friends of Job, Eliphaz, the Temanite.

His argument is subtle and powerful. He appeals to Job's own experience. "After all," argues Eliphaz, "Job's words have been so helpful to other people who were in distress." But now that trouble has come to Job personally, Eliphaz chides his friend for cracking under pressure. After all, he argues, when did the innocent ever perish or were the upright cut off? Eliphaz commends Job for his past. Job's words have kept people from stumbling. Job has steadied those with feeble knees.

So, it is a fair question. How does a person keep his footing in such a slippery time?

II.

One such word is the conviction that life is an entrustment. It is the conviction that every life is not an accident but is rooted in the creation and purposes of a sovereign God.

Richard Dawkins, a prominent atheist today, and author of the book, *The God Delusion*, has recently published a new work entitled *The Greatest Show on Earth* in which he celebrates the wonders of evolution. Dawkins focuses much of his criticism on the so-called "Creationists" who believe that the world was created 10,000 years ago. Apparently, Dawkins is not aware that there are many Christians who do not find a contradiction between a belief in God and a scientific theory of evolution.

There is, however, a very basic distinction that one must maintain, and it is that human life is not simply an accident but rather that human life has purpose, direction, and meaning and these are things that are given to us by a creator.

There is something in human life that cannot be reduced to simply an accidental coming together of certain atoms in random fashion. There are things like courage, commitment, and trust that are values that are more than accidental. When Abraham Lincoln, against the advice of some of his friends, decided to make a speech that ultimately defeated him in his bid to win election to the United States Senate in 1858, he said, "If it is decreed that I should go down because of this speech, then let me go down linked to the truth."

That kind of conviction and sacrifice is centered on a belief that life is sacred. It is a trust that must not be misused. It rests on the confidence that there is an Eternal who has entrusted us with the gift of life and that we must not fail that which has been entrusted to us.

To be sure, life is very difficult. It is often unfair, as Job painfully knew. But underneath it all is a trust given to each of us and that trust must not be violated.

III.

There is another word that has strengthened people in difficult times and it is the confidence that some of the greatest successes of the world have come out of defeat.

There is a brand of Christianity today that is very popular, though certainly not new, and it is called the “gospel of wealth.” In it is preached the notion that being a Christian can make a person successful, wealthy, and happy. Nothing could be further from the truth. To be sure, there are Christians who are successful, wealthy, and happy, but that is not the gospel we proclaim.

The gospel we proclaim is rooted in the conviction that human suffering is not only necessary, but it is redemptive. The message of the Christian faith is the story of a man who was crucified by evil people but whom God raised from the dead so that even the terrible tragedy of Good Friday was overcome by the power of Easter morning.

A number of years ago the University of Glasgow in Scotland bestowed on Helen Keller an honorary doctorate for her work with people who were blind and deaf. There she stood, having overcome the terrible handicap of being born blind and deaf and yet one of the most useful and radiant personalities of her generation. Later, through the lips of her interpreter she made a brief response, thanking them for a “deed of generosity from the masters of knowledge and light to those who live under the cover of denial.” Her closing words were these: “Darkness and silence need not bar the progress of the immortal spirit.”

It is a mysterious paradox that while we deplore Helen Keller’s calamity, we admire her courage and power to handle such tragedy. So one woman, hopelessly crippled in an accident, said to her family, “I’ll show you how to take trouble. How you take it is the only thing about it that’s important.”

IV.

Then too, one of the things that helps us to go on in the midst of great trouble is our confidence that there is power to see a person through.

The Apostle Paul calls this “being strengthened in the inner person.” Many contemporary Christians have lost this. Christianity to them has become a set of ethical principles by which to live or a series of social causes to live for. But ethical principles to live by and social causes to live for require power and are unable to supply that power. So many Christians today find themselves with moral ideals and a new social order to struggle toward but without the interior, personal, or spiritual power to assist them in the struggle.

When Dr. Elsie McKee was here this past week, she spoke of the power that the Reformer John Calvin had over the city of Geneva. There was no aspect of the city's life that was outside of Calvin's concern. He preached several times a week, lectured on the Scriptures, wrote commentaries on almost every book of the Bible. But he did all of that in the midst of the ordinary tasks of ministry: visiting the sick, dealing with the conflicts in the local church, and handling difficult people.

When asked where Calvin received the power and energy to accomplish what he did, Dr. McKee replied by saying that Calvin had a strong awareness that his life had at every moment to do with God. He was not alone.

I think there is nothing more important than to be able to say with the Apostle Paul, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

In last Monday's *New York Times* there was a remarkable article speaking about the decline of Protestantism today. The author contrasted a speech made by Pope Benedict XVI concerning the influence of radical Islam today to a speech given by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. In his speech Williams spoke of the need of Europe to accommodate itself to the radical vision of Islam. Williams even envisioned the day when Europe would be ruled by both British and Islamic law. The Pope, on the other hand, challenged the fundamentalist views of Islam and proclaimed that the West would not accommodate a radical view of Islam.

Many people today feel that Protestants have accommodated themselves to almost every aspect of our contemporary culture.

But the church is called to be more than a reflection of the culture in which we live. As Presbyterians, we have viewed Christ as the "transformer of culture." In his letter to the church at Rome the Apostle Paul admonishes his readers "Not to be conformed to the world, but to be transformed by the renewal of our minds."

In Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* there is a scene in which these two friends of Hamlet are on their way from Denmark to England. Unknown to them, they are carrying a sealed letter that will seal their own death. Along the way, these two young men sense that they are moving from an event to their destiny. At one point one of these young men turns to his friend and says, "There must have been a moment in the beginning, when we could have said, 'No,' but that moment has passed."

God is calling us today to stand firm today in a time when the winds of culture are blowing strongly against us.

May God grant us wisdom to discern the spirit of the times and the strength to stand firm against the forces of evil that prevail around us.

Amen!