

“Dream Big”
Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

Sermon begins with Scott standing next to a bench; impatient and waiting for something, perhaps a bus. After several seconds of shifting and moving around on the end of the bench, Scott notices the congregation and begins to talk.

I really hate waiting, I’m waiting for the bus on the Holy Highway to God - to the Kingdom of God. And it is late. Waiting, waiting, waiting. It’s just like C. S. Lewis, described in his wonderful book called “The Great Divorce,” about how people would get on the bus - and they would wait, and the bus would take them all the way to Heaven. But so many people, when they were waiting, gave up before the bus even arrived, and they missed their chance for Heaven. Then he said, other people would be already on the bus, and when they would stop to get other people, they would look out the window and see all of the cool things that were happening in the world, all of the interesting things they just didn’t want to miss, and they would get off the bus, and they would miss their way to the kingdom of God.

This passage of Isaiah 35:1-10, talks about the idea of waiting, of not wanting to miss out, but of being frustrated, tired and frustrated of all of this waiting. Most of us - I mean not all of you can be like me and be very patient people. [Laughter.] Some of you are a little impatient in your lives. You are run by the clock. You want to get things done. That is very tough when you are person of faith, because God’s time is not our time. We feel scorched and frustrated and we give up.

That is what is happening in this passage. The people have waited for their return from exile. It was over 60-some years since the last person could remember what it was like to live in the Promised Land. By the time they were ready to go back they were all Babylonians, they didn’t know what it was like to be a person from Jerusalem anymore, and they didn’t know what it would be like when they returned; and, they really didn’t want to go back. A lot of them just wanted to stay. They were so frustrated, and many of them had scorched their souls as described in Isaiah, that they lost their faith. It had been burned away by the frustration of waiting.

It reminds me of what happened to Napoleon Bonaparte. It was 1798. He had burned and terrorized all of these different nations as he was taking over the world. He had worked his way through Egypt. He had come up into Israel. Nobody stood in his way, until he got to the northern most point of Israel, to the town of Acre. That small military enclave waited him out. They couldn’t win, but they knew with their beautiful land area - the way it was laid against the ocean and with the walls they had set up - that Napoleon couldn’t get them either.

They knew Napoleon was coming, so they put enough food away, and they said, “We will just wait - in our beautiful place - with enough water and food, and we will see if Napoleon’s army could overcome.”

Sure enough, sitting there in that desert, Napoleon’s army got dry and they got tired of waiting. Napoleon never recovered from that loss. But neither did the Middle East, because

when Napoleon finally retreated and gave up, he didn't just send his troops home. Every step he made in retreat he burned; it's part of the reason Israel was such a desert and is so barren.

Do you ever wonder when you read the Old Testament - and even today when they talk about lions not being there - part of the reason is Napoleon burned it all down to the dust so there were no more animals, there were no more woods and the beauty of the cedars of Lebanon? Everything had been burned away by that darned guy! But they won. They still survived as a people and they were willing to wait. And, it was in the waiting and knowing how to wait faithfully, that they were able to survive Napoleon and how the people of Israel, at their greatest moments, waited on a God they trusted.

Like last week, we talked about the Assyrians. The people of Israel in Judah, who were much smaller, survived the Assyrians by waiting them out and trusting God to keep them at bay.

In most of life's trials and tribulations, it's in the waiting that we either thrive or we struggle. It's in the waiting, done with hope and not allowing your soul to get scorched, that you can be thriving as a people, and as an individual, to feel the great and glorious movement of the Spirit - dream big dreams, hope great hopes, even when all around you are struggling. Because we, as people of faith, trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to give us that strength and hope, and never allow our souls to get scorched to the point that we no longer exist. Too many people give their faith away. They just give up and become bitter and cynical, and allow their souls to get scorched.

In those moments where I needed that strength I, of all people, often go to a Buddhist Mon. named Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist, and very close friend of Martin Luther King Jr. He wrote a number of books. One of them is titled "Peace in every Step," a beautiful book and I have it on audio book, so I can just listen to it and let the words move into me.

One of the stories he tells is how not to allow your soul to get scorched. He gives the example of a fire and he said, "When there is a fire, you don't worry in that moment about who set it. You put the darn thing out. Once the fire is put out, then you worry later about who started it, and how to deal with that." It is the same way with human beings when we are struggling and there is a fire of pain and frustration and anger in our hearts. The first thing you do isn't to go looking for who did it or who to be mad at. If you are going to not allow your soul to get scorched, you first must put the fire out in your heart - the fire of anger, the fire of bitterness - and allow that comfort to come upon you. Only when the fire is out in your heart do you then turn to evaluate why, and who, and what, and how, you should deal with it, and what you should do.

But Thich Nhat Hanh said, "Far too often when you feel that fire burning, and it's starting to scorch your heart, rather than calm it down and put the fire out, we human beings turn and try to find who we blame, what we want to attack. It inflames the fire inside of us. So that, by the time you worked out what you are mad at, who you want to blame and what you want to do, it doesn't matter anymore. Your soul is gone. It is burned up, it is crumbled up into nothing but dust. You have nothing else to work with or even live for. Put the fire out, so that your soul is always right, and then turn and evaluate. When your soul is on fire

you respond differently than when it is full and cool and comfortable. You respond very differently in those situations.”

Over and over again in the Old Testament as well as the New [Testament] with Jesus, as well as the prophets, they were constantly working on how we respond - not that we will be saved from all of the trials and tribulations in this world. The prophets and Jesus coach us up on how to handle our souls in a healthy and meaningful way, so that we can deal with the problems of this world.

Helping heal his scorched heart in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus put out the fire in his own soul before it got scorched, so that when he was hung on that cross just a few short days later, he still had enough warmth and love in his heart that he could turn and be concerned about the others hanging on the cross next to him; could reach out and cry to his mother at the foot of the cross; be compassionate for even the ones who were killing him, screaming out some of his last words, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

He could only do that because he had put out the fire in his own heart - of frustration and pain - and because Jesus was totally human he had those experiences. He had that anger. The same anger that kicked over the tables at the Temple had to happen at the garden of Gethsemane. But, he calmed himself, and then knew how to respond, and that allowed him to dream the big dream that his death was not simply for himself, but that would reconcile the entire world to himself.

When you are struggling in a moment, remember Thich Nhat Hahn. Go and care for your soul. Protect it and guard it. Take care of it. It isn’t selfish, because it allows you to care for others without being inflamed, and without destroying who God wants you to be. Then you will thrive. The goal is to not live a scorched life, and God through Jesus Christ, through the movement of the Holy Spirit, will put that out. As you wait, time and time again, God will put out the flames in your heart and allow you to reach out with love and care. Be patient. Christ will come again, but may we be diligent while we wait and never let our hearts be scorched, and our souls destroyed. But, may they be renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit today and always.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.