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Psalm 116 (N.E.)
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WHO'S IN CHARGE?

There is a cute little story concerning two monks who were one day discussing how difficult it was to refrain from smoking while they were supposed to be meditating in the cloister. One of them suggested that perhaps it was all right to smoke and that they should both write the Pope for his advice in the matter. A few weeks later they met again to compare notes. The first monk reported that he had heard from the Pope but that the head of the church had severely reprimanded him for even asking such a question. The second monk asked him what he had said in his letter. He replied, "I asked the Pope if it was all right if I smoked while I was meditating." "Well, you asked the wrong question," said the second monk. "I asked his holiness if it was all right if I meditated while I was smoking and he replied, 'Good Boy!'"

There is a difference between working while we meditate and meditating while we work and that difference can sometimes be very important. There have been times, I must confess, while I have been driving my car that I have been so deep in thought I got to my destination without really being conscious of how I got there. That is not good. One should concentrate on driving his car and meditate in a safer environment--as Jesus put it, "in one's closet".

One day recently, however, I was thus engaged in meditation while driving to the hospital, and the final result of my meditation is this morning's sermon. The cause of my particular line of thought that day was that I could remember upon my early arising that this was going to be one of those very few days I could remember when I had nothing I absolutely had to do. There are indeed very few of those days. I envisioned all the reading and study I was going to be able to do that day. Today we refer to the minister's office. It used to be called his study. But if I am an average example very little studying gets done there. But this day was going to be different. This was going to be my day and I was going to be in charge of my own life.

I had been in my office just five minutes when the telephone rang. There had been a sudden death and I was needed. When I returned there were several other messages awaiting me, and that first five minutes of the day were all that was to be of my grandiose plans for a complete day in which I could be master of my own destiny.

Ever have a day like that? Of course you have. Every mother of young children has 365 days a year like that. (This year she'll have 366 of them!) Every businessman and worker has innumerable

days like that. Human beings invented vacations so they could get away from all the routine and all the demands and rediscover themselves. Unfortunately we often discover that we are not even in charge of our vacations.

II

Now there are at least two reasons why you and I are not in charge even though we sometimes think we are. The first reason is that we are social beings. None of us lives to himself alone and very few of us would want to. Yes, there are times when it seems appealing. We would like to get away from everything and everyone, and like Henry David Thoreau enjoy complete solitude at our very own Walden Pond. But a few days of that would be enough. We would soon get lonesome for our families and long for someone to talk to. I know a man living in northern Michigan who spends most of his time alone except for a few words he occasionally exchanges with his wife. Whenever a visitor appears he is so happy to have someone around he talks a blue streak and causes his visitor to wish he was alone. We are social creatures; it's part of our nature.

Such being the case, we must act and interact with others and cannot always do precisely as we please. Of course I could selfishly have determined that I would let absolutely nothing interfere with my plans on that day I previously mentioned. Occasionally I do just that. But if that were to become my habit, I would again discover that I was not in charge as the congregation began to look for a new minister. As long as you and I want to keep on eating we have to accept the fact that we cannot always be in charge. The price is too great. Few of us will pay it.

III

The second and more fundamental reason you and I cannot always be in charge is that God is in charge. This is His universe, not ours. We are not our own; we belong to Him. We can lay all the little plans for our lives we desire. But He can just ignore those plans and change the whole course of our lives anytime He wants to. He does indeed "move in mysterious ways His wonders to perform."

Moses was a happy shepherd on the hills of Midian. Married to the boss's daughter with a great future before him, he thought he had everything tied up in a neat little bundle. But then the burning bush! "Moses, I want you to go to Egypt." "Lord, I don't want to go to Egypt." But Moses went to Egypt. God had some plans for Moses, you see, that Moses didn't know anything about.

Job thought he was sitting on top of the world. He was the prototype of all those men who have been eminently successful and think nothing can disturb the security of their well-laid plans. But soon Job had lost everything and sat in sack-cloth and ashes wishing he was dead.

Jesus told us about a man whose barns were so full he tore them down and built larger ones to hold his grain. That man was probably in charge of a lot of servants, but he wasn't in charge of life and death. "Thou fool," said Jesus, "this night your soul will be required of thee, then whose shall all these things be?"

Many years ago I thought I was in charge of my life. My mother tried to influence me. She wanted me to be a minister and I responded as many times as she suggested it, "That's the last thing I'll ever be!" But here I am. Just who was in charge?

My good and long-suffering wife once thought she was in charge of her life. She and I were but two of a group of students holding a conversation during a coffee break one day when she declared, "I'd never marry a minister!" I hope she's occasionally thankful that she wasn't in charge.

How many times in life have your hopes and dreams and plans been shattered as you have discovered that you were not in charge? It's not your world. It's not even your life. It belongs to God. He permits us a great latitude of free will. He lets us sin and he lets us make mistakes, but behind it all he stands. You and I and all the universe cannot change that which is his ultimate destiny and purpose for his creation.

IV

God being in charge, you and I had better learn how to cooperate with Him. There is no other method by which we may know happiness and ultimate joy. There is only pain and sorrow and frustration in trying to secure our own little ends if they are not in harmony with his.

There is no time this morning to go into detail as to how you and I may learn effectively to cooperate with God and His will. Suffice it to say that the first thing we must do is to seek to know Him and his will. The more we cooperate with Him, the fuller and more abundant our lives become and the fewer our bumps and bruises.

Along with the search after God must go the search after His power without which we find it difficult and sometimes impossible to do His will. But that power is there; it is available to us; it is a discipline that is required; it is hard work; it is learning how to pray and meditate, but along this way alone lies the pathway to God.

As we thus struggle toward a fuller understanding of God we will learn that in his good time all things will work together for good. We will end up thanking and praising Him that He is in charge and not we ourselves.

One word of caution. Nothing I have said this morning is meant to imply that you and I do not have free will. As Gerald Heard has put it, "We live in a world of lawful freedom." We have free will, but it is not unlimited free will. We are free within the limitations laid down by God--within the limitations of his moral and natural laws. A little child is free to walk across the living room, but no reasonable and loving parent gives him freedom to walk over the edge of a precipice and harm himself.

God's laws are meant to protect and help us. The more we learn of them the better. But He is in charge. And those few laws which we think restrain our freedom protect and guard us from self-destruction.

V

Now, may I finally return to the 116th Psalm.

"Gracious is the Lord and righteous,
our God is full of compassion.
The Lord preserves the simple hearted;
I was brought low and he saved me."

When you can't do what you want to do, when you bump your will against the will of others or against God's laws, don't fret and moan that you can't have your way. "The Lord preserves the simple hearted," not those whose pride and vanity won't let them admit that they are not running the whole show. It is when we are finally brought low, in full humility, that God can finally save us--when we finally recognize and acknowledge that He is in charge and have full faith and confidence that He knows what He is doing and does all things well.

Let God have charge of your life; he can do far more with it than you can.