

November 29, 1981  
(Advent)  
Luke 1:57-80 (NE)  
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### "THE FORERUNNERS"

"For you will be the Lord's forerunner..." Luke 1:76.

There is a fine Christian gentleman who worships with us occasionally, who lives in another state, but comes to our community to visit his children and grandchildren. Recently, there came into my hands a prayer he had written for use in his own church when he took part in a service there. Part of that prayer goes like this:

"Our heavenly Father, in this time of crisis-psychology, many of us are confused by and fearful of events and conditions over which we seem to have little control, if any. Some of us are even scared. We grope and we stumble and make choices convenient to ourselves...We say that we yearn for peace, but war seems inevitable. We need your assurance that love is mightier than the sword or the bomb."

This layman expresses the fear and the anxiety that abides in many minds and hearts as we enter the Advent season in this year of our Lord, 1981. Yet the attitude is not peculiar to our age. Many men and women in ages now past have had similar apprehensions. Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish essayist and historian of the last century, once expressed his gloomy view of God and the world by likening the movement of human affairs to a railway train drawn by a locomotive whose driver had been killed:

"The train is the world; we are the freight; fate is the track; death is the darkness; God is the engineer--who is dead."

It was less than a generation ago, that some of our own country's theologians, in light of the cruelties and barbarities which human beings inflict on one another, were also insisting that, "God is dead." Certainly the God of Jesus Christ often seems to be dead in the minds and hearts of many men and women.

In that period of history, in which Jesus entered the world, things were not much different. The scale on which men could annihilate one another was not nearly so great, but the same evil passions, the same greed, envy, and jealousy provided the motivation for war and general malevolence.

Because hope springs eternal in the human breast, the prophets of Israel, a people long subjected to war and slavery, had repeatedly promised the coming from God of one who would bring peace and tranquility. Thus, the prophet, Malachi, recorded God as saying to him, "I am sending my messenger, who will clear a path before me..." And perhaps the greatest prophet of all, Isaiah, proclaimed, "there is a voice that cries, "'Prepare a road for the Lord into the wilderness; clear a highway across the desert for our God.'" He too, was telling his people that God would soon send a deliverer.

But if, as we Christians maintain, Jesus was that deliverer, that Messiah, that Christ, the fulfillment of all those prophecies, he failed to bring us a world of peace and righteousness and the past two thousand years of history will amply attest to that.

## II

Just prior to Jesus' birth, the "word of the Lord" came to his aunt, Elizabeth, whose husband was Zechariah. Elizabeth was to give birth to a son whose name was to be John, and upon the birth of that son, the father uttered a prophecy which included these words:

"And you, my child, you shall be called prophet of the Highest, for you will be the Lord's forerunner, to prepare His way and lead His people to salvation through knowledge of Him..."

According to the word of Isaiah, echoed by Matthew and Mark, John was to be "a voice crying in the wilderness," and that, indeed, he was.

I have the distinct feeling that today more of us do not wish to be voices crying in the wilderness. We prefer to be part of large and successful movements in which we may maintain our anonymity. We have no desire to be martyrs, or as Paul put it, "fools for Christ's sake." Therein lies a disease that afflicts our society. A forerunner has to be something of a hero and we do not have any great taste for heroes in our generation. We prefer to be anonymous cowards. Better a living coward than a dead hero and most heroes and heroines tend to die young.

In one of her books, George Eliot put it this way:

"Any coward can fight the battle when he's sure of winning; but give me the man who has pluck to fight when he's sure of losing. That's my way, sir; and there are many victories worse than a defeat."

Whitaker Chambers had in mind the same thing when he deserted the Communists and joined the free world. At that time, he wrote that he was joining the losing side. Not many of us are brave enough to do that consciously.

What we are saying this morning, is that we all need to be forerunners of a new race of men if we are ever to have that new and better race. We can't depend on a few "Johns" doing it for us. I can certainly find nothing in the Old or New Testaments, nor in secular history that promises us "a brave new world" if we will only wait long enough for someone to bring it to us and lay it at our feet. You and I are called to be "forerunners" of God's kingdom and when we fail, that kingdom fails.

## III

What is it, do you think that most inspires men and women to build qualities of moral and spiritual greatness into their lives so that they can become forerunners and heroes? When I was in theological seminary,

all the students were asked to state what it was that motivated them to commit themselves to full-time Christian service as ministers. I remember one young man whose answer was so unique I have never forgotten it; he committed himself to the ministry, so he said, because he was motivated to do so by books he had read. He was the rare exception. The great majority of young men, at that time at least, were inspired and motivated to become ministers because of the life of some other person they had known. I am persuaded that that is still the case. They verified the judgement of Albert Schweitzer who once wrote, "Example is not the best thing, it is the only thing."

Albert Schweitzer was one who set the example, as has Mother Theresa, but I do not recall seeing many statues erected to the honor of either. On the other hand, head an army that kills thousands of our temporary enemies and you will be honored in innumerable ways by millions of your fellow men. Such is the value system of a confused civilization.

Every one of us who calls himself a Christian, is called to be a forerunner, a herald, a messenger from God to this needy world, announcing that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life; announcing that Jesus Christ is Lord. If he is not that, then Christmas is a farce and a delusion and we ought to forget about the whole thing.

We are forerunners, or we ought to be, those who go before, leading our generation into a new age. We should be spirit-filled men and women with enlightened minds and consecrated spirits who will lead humanity upward into the way of peace and righteousness.

The eminent historian, Samuel Elliot Morrison, has written of our Pilgrim Fathers,

"No people who went out to form a colony, were ever so ill-trained and so poorly provided with the materials to make a success as these, yet none came through so triumphantly."

We Christians, in particular, ought to remember that when we get discouraged, and disheartened, and depressed.

If the world is a mess, then you and I must share part of the blame. Why did we let it get into such a mess? By our actions or our inactions, you and I contributed to that mess and now the question is, what will we do about the future? Will we make it better or worse by what we are today and tomorrow? If coming events cast their shadows before, we must ask what shadows we are casting on the future.

You and I are meant to be the forerunners of the Kingdom of God. Don't complain that there's nothing you can do. God picks very unlikely people to do His will and to transform history. As a matter of fact, even Jesus was a very unlikely choice--the child of poor parents, born in an obscure town, in an obscure country, leader of a small band of men who, for the most part, misunderstood him, crucified as a common thief.

I remember a few years ago a young high school girl in this church speaking to me and insisting that the church had failed. In a sense, she was absolutely right, but in the sense in which she talked about the church, it wasn't the church that had failed, it was she who had failed. People fail, and people don't fail collectively, they fail individually. That girl dropped out of the church because she thought it had failed, when, as a matter of fact, she failed. She failed to help an organization with a great potential for good. She failed, not the church.

The church, indeed, in a different sense, has failed and individual Christians have failed, and if we had not failed, we would not be here this morning, complaining about the mess our world is in. We'd be living in the Kingdom of God.

Do you want this world, what, in your fondest dreams, your most idealistic moments, you envision it could be? Do you want the Kingdom of God to dominate the lives of men as Jesus said it could? Then start today to become a righteous person; thinking right thoughts, doing right deeds, patterning your life after that of Jesus Christ, and thus becoming a right example to all who know or have contact with you. That is the way in which you and I can become "forerunners" of the Kingdom of God and demonstrate to the world that love is indeed mightier than the sword or the bomb.