

"USEFUL LIVING"
February 3, 1991

TEXT: Mark 1:27 ". . . With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."

For the second time in less than a month, our lives have been deeply touched by events over which we have little or no control. As many of you recall, two weeks ago, I changed my sermon and two of our hymns in response to the fact that our nation was once again at war. But I don't think any of us even remotely suspected that one of the first to die would be from our own church family.

It was just a little less than four years ago, on March 29th, 1987, that Scott Schroeder knelt here at the altar to be confirmed as a member of this church. Now, just twenty years old, Scott has given his life for the values and the country in which he so deeply believed. And his death has touched us all in one way or another. Our hearts go out to his parents, Don and Sharie, and to his brothers, Chip, Erik, and T.J. And, like them, we find ourselves haunted by the question. "Why."

President Bush has declared this to be a National Day of Prayer. But I'm sure that many of us needed no such reminder. Those of us who knew Scott, and many who didn't, would certainly echo the words of Abraham Lincoln, who said, "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go." So we come now, to this place of sacred memories, hoping to find here the comfort which the world can never give.

Nor are we the only ones. The presence of TV cameras reminds us that others, too, have been shaken by the events of these past few weeks. Throughout this community, and, indeed, all over the world, people are trying to make sense out of things they don't understand and which seem to have no meaning at all. They are looking for stability in a world whose very foundations have been shaken.

As I said two weeks ago, I wish I had some simple answer to give them. But the truth is that I don't. And neither does anyone else. The issues are too complex, and there is too much we don't, and can't, understand. I won't insult your intelligence by suggesting otherwise. But I can point you to a faith that has helped countless others, not only to survive, but to triumph.

That faith was best expressed by the Apostle Paul, himself no stranger to trouble. In his second letter to the church at Corinth he writes: "Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches." (II Corinthians 11:25-28)

If anyone ever needed something to hold on to, something to give life meaning, to make it worthwhile, it was Paul. But, like the rest of us, he didn't have all the answers. He didn't even expect to. He admitted quite freely that now we know only in part, see only dim reflections in a mirror. (I Corinthians 13:12)

Yet he didn't give up. As he wrote, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Corinthians 4:8-9) Who of us wouldn't like to have that kind of strength?

Well, I believe we can --if we seek it in the same place. In II Timothy, chapter 1, verse 12, he wrote, "And therefore I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me." Paul found strength and meaning, not in words, but in God. And we can, too.

In this morning's Scripture lesson we see Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry. He has already been baptized. He's been tempted in the wilderness. He has called his first disciples. And now, in the synagogue at Capernaum, we find him engaged in the first skirmish of his war against evil. As he tries to teach, he is interrupted by a man with an unclean spirit.

Immediately, the demon tries to get the upper hand. He tries to intimidate Jesus by saying, "I know who you are, Jesus. You're the Holy One of God." In those days, you see, it was generally accepted that knowing a person's name gave you power over him. But Jesus is undaunted. He dismisses the demon as easily as you or I might brush away a fly. "Be quiet!" he commands. "Be quiet, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit departs defeated."

Now, of course, you and I don't believe in demons. We're too sophisticated for that. We no longer believe that evil things can get inside us and make us do things we know we shouldn't. We no longer believe in forces that can take control of us and twist what we think and say till we find ourselves hurting others and ourselves.

Of course, put it that way, it almost sounds like the way some people are driven by fear, or consumed by greed, or dominated by dreams of power and glory. In spite of all our science and technology, perhaps we haven't come so far from Jesus' day at that.

D. Michael Brewer writes, "Whether you want to talk about pointy tails and pitchforks, or sociological trends and psychological predispositions, the end result remains the same. If a demon is something within us which steals away our joy and hope and strength, if a demon is some inner failing which turns our lives into a burden and trial, then our world is literally smothered in demons."

And God is at work today, as He was in Capernaum, casting out the demons that beset us. Then he worked through Jesus. Today he works through us. As Martin Luther said, "We are all little Christs." Prayer is important. I believe in it, as Jesus did. But Jesus didn't just pray and then forget it. By his words and by his actions, he showed us that demons can be exorcised only if we love God with all our heart, mind, and soul, and our neighbors as ourselves. (Mark 12:30)

It isn't easy. It takes more than just prayer. It also takes commitment. The kind of commitment that leads to blood, sweat, and tears. Scott Schroeder might not have had to die. He was dehydrated and hospitalized, but he insisted on going back to the front the very next day. He injured his shoulder and might have spent some time recuperating. Perhaps time enough that someone else could have been driving Scott's vehicle that night.

But Scott was committed --to his job and to his country. He paid for that commitment with his life. And, in so doing, he set a standard for the rest of us. A long time ago, during a different kind of war, Abraham Lincoln said, "It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us --that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion --that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain."

If Scott's death is to have any real meaning, we must do the same. By all means let us pray. I believe in it. Pray for the troops, for innocent civilians, for the Iraqis, who are also children of God, and for our beloved country. But let us also begin wherever we are to exorcise the demons that restrict and shrivel life. Let us offer ourselves to be channels by which our prayers --and the prayers of a weary world-- may be answered.

Nathan Schaeffer wrote, "At the close of life, the question will be not, how much have you got? but how much have you given? Not how much have you won? but how much have you done? Not how much have you saved? but how much have you sacrificed? It will be how much have you loved and served? not how much were you honored?"

If we really want this world to become the kind of place where young men like Scott no longer have to die, let us find some place where we can render service; then render it and leave the rest up to God.