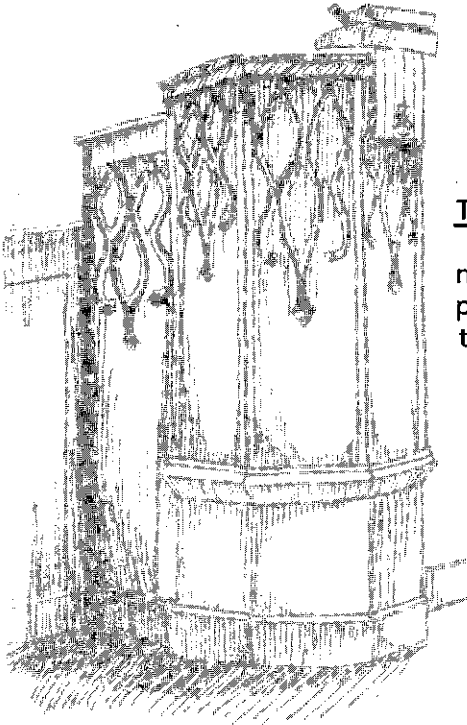


3/30/75

The Southminster Pulpit

"SNOWFALL ON AN EASTER MORNING"



Text: "Therefore, if anyone
be in Christ, he is a
new creation; old things are
passed away; behold, all
things are become new."

II Corinthians 5:17

March 30, 1975

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How little did I know as I chose this sermon topic back in early February, when our neighboring Groundhog, Punxsutawney Phil, was predicting fair and warm for the early spring, that my title would be the envy of The Farmer's Almanac this year! Ever since I came out this morning to find snow on the ground, I have been fighting the temptation to revel in this precious piece of prophecy.

What I really was thinking about in the title was an Easter Sunday a few years ago when a freak snowstorm hit the area north of Pittsburgh where we were serving at the time. When we awakened in the wee hours to make ready for the 6 a.m. Sunrise Service, our sleepy eyes were greeted by the awesome sight of four of the wettest and most slippery inches of snow you ever have seen. I was crushed almost to disbelief. Not that I am a stranger to the joys of winter, nor unappreciative of the glories of the snow. While I am not an avid skier nor a steady companion of Sargeant Preston and his Yukon King, I do thrive on the cold. Spring entices us with newness; summer makes its own beloved way; autumn is a lingering joy; but for those of us who were born and bred to the four seasons of the North-east, winter has a glory all its own.

And yet, I still believe that a snowfall on a Sunday morning is a devilish kind of ministerial curse. Any preacher worth his rock salt can recite from memory how unkind the skies have been to the First day of the week. As others chart the movement of the stars, or the fortunes of their favorite hockey team, ministers chart attendances at Sunday Services. We live with the humbling knowledge that usually the church comes in second anyway. If the weather is slightly bad, it is too bad to get out Sunday morning. If it's a little

worse, they all get up and go out skiing. If it's overly warm, the church will be too hot. And when it's just right, golfers play golf and others go away for the weekend. Like that cartoon I saw last spring where a hurrying golfer rushes up to the first tee, apologizing to his partner that he was sorry to be late but it was a toss-up whether he would play golf or go to church; "Can you believe it," he said, "I had to toss the coin up thirteen times before the golf course won."

Well, anyway, that Easter Sunday we had planned a joyous Sunrise Service for the whole community; then two special Services, with extra-special music for 9:30 and 11 a.m.; and a Reception for out-of-town guests and potential new members. But that was all before the snow, and, oh, did it ever flop. Seventeen stalwart worshippers made it to the Sunrise Service and spent most of the hour shoveling out the place; twice that many came at 9:30; Church School was empty, and three-fifths of the specially prepared Choir didn't show for eleven o'clock. (The remaining two-fifths offered up their slightly imbalanced tones which passed for Easter music mainly because we were grateful that anybody had come at all. Since then, I have figured out that there is probably a directly inversed relationship between a person's ability to make it on a bad morning and a person's ability to hold a steady ecclesiastical tune.) Whatever, it was a bad day at the black rock of the minister's study, and I declared to man and God how unfair it seemed to me to have the Easter holiday ruined by the snow...

But then, one must eventually be chastised for talk like that. It came when I met a friend who also served a Presbyterian Church that Easter Sunday morning, directing the Christian Education program. She told me what a grand day it had been.

When she got the Church School children together, they, too, talked of the snow. They said it looked like God got tired of his dirty old world, and so He said, 'I'm going to make a whole new world this Easter and cover the old one over with pretty pure white snow. Then my people can see how easy it is and see a symbol of what Easter really means.' God covers up the darkness of all our fears and failures, and looks down on us through the pure white snow of the new life which is offered to us in the living Christ, now and forever more, Amen...

You know, my friends, we are going to be about this sermon for a few more minutes, but I cannot improve on that simple, almost naive, statement, for it gets you quickly to the heart of all you need to hear and know this glorious Easter Day. That's what God does in Christ. Into that hurried, worried, home-made world, ricocheting from one crisis to the next, where the debris accumulates from all our broken promises and unkept rendezvous with the sundry destinies of our higher selves; wedded to the selected compromises that one is compelled to make, if to remain unbroken - or so we think; that transient place where the good and lovely ones you love too much to lose are snatched away, while the sorry excuses of God's forsaken brutes live on with ease and plenty; and into the middle of it all comes the calm and reassuring strength of Easter morning.

Just as the Bible does, you have to treat it as a story. The facts themselves cannot belong outside the common parlance of the ordinary. You almost have to sing about it - words alone can hardly do it. The Easter thrill is more a kind of transcending presence that belongs to poetry, not prose. To ever get it right, we have to allow ourselves to be caught up in its majestic might outside of

the time and space we occupy.

There's our text to greet you, too. It comes at the end of that marvelous Fifth Chapter of Second Corinthians, which begins with the declaration of the house we have, not made with hands, eternal in the heavens, given to us by the Christ who died to make us whole. Therefore we live no longer for ourselves, but for Him. "If anyone be in Christ, he is a new creation; old things are passed away (dead and gone); behold all things become new."

That's what Jesus said to Nicodemus, the wealthy pharisee, in the Third Chapter of John, who had come to talk about this wonderful new way of life he had heard about. Jesus said, "If you want to share in the only new kind of life you need, you must be born again." That puzzled Nicodemus and his completely intellectual world. "How can a man be born again when he is old?" he asked. Poor thing, he was a teacher of religion and he didn't know the first step in it all. I think he was old and tired out, had lost heart and given up. He had wasted it, in the main, devoted to a whole host of paltry little things that looked impressive at the time but aren't worth a tinker's dam when it's all over. Inexorably, what is written, is written. Finis! A great English preacher of long ago said gravely that while Christ had healed the sick, and cleansed the lepers, even raised the dead, He never made an old man young again. True. How can a man be born anew when he is old?

But then, to fly in the face of that, comes Christ's impossibly stupendous claim: it can happen. A snowfall can come over your weak tawdry life this Easter Sunday just as surely as it fell across the hills of Palestine. You can be born again; cover up the old and be redirected to the kind of life

you need. That new birth is a gift from the Risen Christ; a whole new life with a whole new attitude is offered to you. Christ has the power to change you over, just like the snow that covers up the earth. It was known to fall to the depth of a full foot, even though it seldom lasted in the cities for more than a day. It does stay in the hills of Palestine throughout the winter, and it lingers on the heights of Mount Lebanon through the middle of summer, and crowns the heights of Mt. Herman all year around. Frequently in the Scripture, as elsewhere, it is an emblem of purity. "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as the snow."

Now that message has your name written on it this morning. It comes to tap you on the shoulder wherever you are hiding. Its varied theme can meet our varied needs. It says, in short, that Christ is bringing newness into the middle of any and all of the old things you carried in today. And, of course, you have heard all that before. But Edwin Way Teale, in his monumental, Wandering Through Winter, tells of the day he came across a tiny little hibernating Nuttall Poorwill, a bird related to the Whippoorwill, a rare ornithological treat found rarely and in the winter, nestled in a slight crevice in the rock about the size of a cupped hand. But when Edwin finally saw it, he observed succinctly:

"A thing may be found many times and still be lost. You can walk right by it time and time again. It must be recognized in order to be seen."

Do you get that? You can wander by the very thing you're looking for a thousand times; you can walk right by it, Nicodemus. It is not found un-

til you recognize it and take it as your own. That is where we begin. In Christ's resurrection from the dead, a whole new attitude to life is formed. First, it applies to the touchstone you are looking for and alters everything which ails your individual soul. Charles Cook once announced a new beatitude after he had completed an exhaustive and exhausting study of the modern American Church: "Blessed are they who expect nothing new to happen, for they will not be disappointed." And Halford Luccock observed that Easter, like that speck in the Pacific called Easter Island, is something people pay a short visit to once a year and then, "All aboard! Back to the mainland!" But Easter is not an island. Easter puts a new dimension into all of it that makes up the mainland of our lives and should be our home forever and a day.

Secondly, it applies to the overpowering problems and possibilities of our time. It just has to, since our God is a God of History. It just has to have a message for the one million frantic refugees of Da Nang, some of whom threw their bodies under the wheels of the last plane out before the Communists took over. What a pity. It has to apply to them...and it does. It must have a singular word to speak to the crumbling peace efforts of the Middle East. And it does. It must be reassuring to those who have been caught in the changing economic conditions of our worn-out modern way of doing things. And it does. It simply must speak to the poor and the hungry here and throughout the weary world; to the lonely and dispossessed; to the fearful, the dying; to broken homes and guilty parents. And it does. It simply must have a decisive word for the liberating ways of Christian theology which not only reflects on the processes of the world, but

is a part of them: God present - struggling, dying and resurrecting to protest every idiocy of man which tramples on human dignity. And it does!

To each of them, it says with power: the love of God in Christ can change and redirect it. There is respite from the daily struggle. There is a home forever more. And for the here and now, there is the hope of a new tomorrow, if men would just be men. A few years ago, Peter Berger announced the return to things of the spirit with a marvelous little book entitled, A Rumor Of Angels. There he related the incident of the young Roman Catholic priest who was laboring away in the slums of a European city to help the poor. Someone asked him why he did it, why he worked so hard for so little. "I do it," he replied, "so that the rumor of God will not disappear completely." The rumor...did you hear that? We are in a time when all things transcendental have been reduced to rumors. So be it...

Our job, then, becomes not so much one of condemning the fact, but of following up the rumor and casting the searchlights of our faith upon it, so that others might see, too. It speaks a concrete word of change. It surely speaks to the problems of the day.

Then, finally, Easter whispers its quiet but decisive word in favor of the ones we have loved long since and lost awhile. It declares the everlasting victory of life over death. I was in Philadelphia not long ago and as we drove through one of those delightful country roads which fan out along the main line, we came across a sign which read, "You are entering historic Upper Merion Town-

ship, Welcome." On returning a while later, we read the same sign from the other side, and there it said, "Goodbye, Godspeed, you are leaving Upper Merion Township, Come back soon." Same sign, two antithetical greetings. Come by the Cross on Thursday night and Good Friday noon and you read, "It is finished." But come by Easter Sunday...same place, same sign, and you read, "Welcome Happy Morning; age to age doth say, 'hell today is vanquished, Heaven is won today.'"

Like a covering of new white shining snow on the face of all the dreary earth... oh, yes, the snow will melt soon enough and the earth will be seen again for what it really is. But now and again, when we're lucky, we see the other side, and behold the glorious rumors coming true that the Lord of all is really here.

How do you find new worlds anyway, Macleish once asked...by sailing to them, by crossing mountains, by fording mighty streams - or perhaps, by believing in them, more quiet and more gentle and more lasting, until all our strivings cease and are covered under the wings of a bright new day. Catch it again, this one last time, like a snowfall on an Easter morning, at the dawning of a new and living time, the recognition of which will transform your soul, our world, and the sting of death itself.

The strife is o'er
The battle done
The victory of life is won
The song of triumph has begun.
Alleluia, Alleluia.