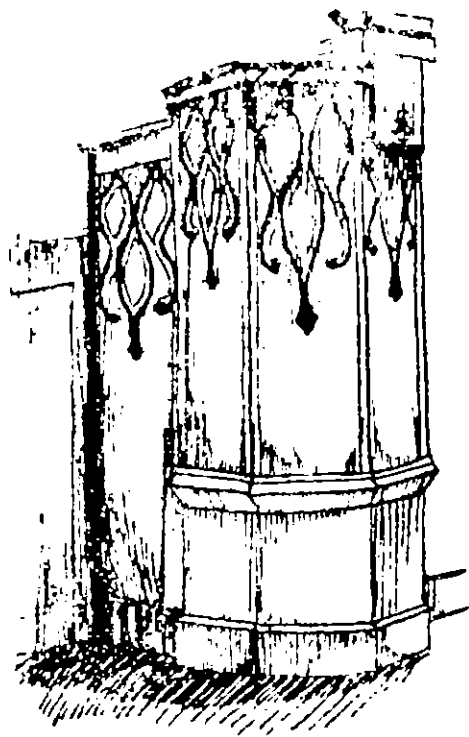


The Southminster Pulpit

"A HOME AND AN HORIZON"



Texts:

"I will lift up my eyes
unto the hills, from
whence cometh my help."
Psalm 121:1

"In the world you have
tribulation, but be of
good cheer, I have over-
come the world."
John 16:33

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Back at the beginning of the earliest pre-Cambrian times, six to four hundred million years ago, the embryonic features of the land we now know in southeastern Pennsylvania were being formed along with other portions of the Great Atlantic Plain. Huge and mighty Appalachian Mountains to the north were heaving up and down across the endless eons, South Mountain especially jutting down to what is now the border, erosion cutting away its pinnacle and peak by an inch each thousand years, in due season to prepare the land with consummate skill and patience, those rolling hillsides with planted minerals beneath and the limestone base for fertile crops - the gifts of God to man. In those days, the trilobites ruled the ancient sea. Reptile tracks in great Triassic beds remind us of the mighty dinosaurs and huge amphibians. And, in a story quite familiar all around the globe, life progressed from stage to stage in the time and Providence of God - The world is old beyond imagining. Through all that passing time, it was as if the earth itself were waiting for the moment I want to tell you of this morning....

Who knows what else transpired in the ages unrecorded. The Vikings wrote about those "ferocious" Algonquians on the Coast. No doubt in the Eleventh Century the Indians were cultivating the "self sown wheat fields" as the Norsemen called them. The northeastern Woodland Indians traversed those parts - some Mohawks surely, the mighty Iroquois nation, the Conestogas to be more specific. The Conewagos had a village at York Haven - the Tuckwaghs as they were called in Maryland - and probably the Nanticokes, too, described by Michener in his Chesapeake, roamed those areas too. They moved back and forth following the grazing land and the beasts. They loved the land and celebrated it in song and

prayer. By a treaty with the Indians in 1736 way up in Albany, the territory was given to the whites. I like to think the echo of the Indian's reverence for the land was present in the moment I want to tell you of this morning....

And the land was there and waiting when the first English Quaker settlers came north from Maryland, attracted by the fertile valleys, and when the Pennsylvania Dutch moved west from Lancaster at the end of the first quarter of the Eighteenth Century. By 1741 there was a town called York. Hanover and Dillsburg were there already. And William Penn would say, "The county's soil, air, water, seasons, and its produce are not to be despised..." The Germans and the Quakers, industrious and forward, cleared the land and petitioned the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania to subdivide the growing Lancaster County; and, when the necessary politicking was completed in mid-August 1749, that portion of the land, in the open country of the Susquehanna Valley, bounded by the River on the East, the Maryland border to the South, North and West a line along South Mountain, there in the gently rolling hills, York County came to be.

From the start it made illustrious contributions to the burgeoning little nation. James Smith, whose mortal remains lie in the Presbyterian churchyard, signed the Declaration of Independence. The first feeble steps toward national government were taken as the "infant Congress" sat in session there in the Spring of '78, to sign the Articles of Confederation, York's finest men already gone as the first from Pennsylvania to join the Continental Army. It later watched and helped and suffered through the horrors of the Civil War, serving as a great hospital center for the sick and wounded, and also as a training ground, then as battlefield, when at the Battle of Hanover on June 30, 1863, the Union Calvary

declared its first supremacy. And a Pennsylvania calvaryman stands proud in bronze in Center Square of Hanover to tell you to this day. Steamboats and locomotives both were born within its borders. It is as if York County and its glories were waiting for the moment I want to tell you of this morning...

Then, in the last decade before the turning of this century, one James Keller, an immigrant from Germany, went out beyond the city limits and built a farmhouse which his family would enjoy for three full generations. He added to the farm and saw to it that his one surviving son was taken care of, and his son's sons in time, prospering, progressing, adding grace and beauty, strength and vision, roots and blossoms for the family tree. I like to think that all three generations were watching in the moment I want to tell you of this morning...

The moment came a year or two ago when I went there as family minister to help a family - but they of course were helping me. It was near enough the saddest day of all. Yet, if you pardon this exaggeration, for the most part it was rather normal. It often is that way; our days of deepest grief start out the same as any other. This family had been through other times, had walked together through many other valleys. We were out near Yorkana, if you know it, or Delroy, and the moment came inside a marvelous new farmhouse named for the pines which run along the edge of its inviting entrance. The family knew each other well and trusted friends stepped easily into the center of it all. Was it not Tolstoi who said, "All happy families are the same, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

It was winter when I first arrived at Pine Edge

Farm, windy, cold and snowy. On days like that you need a home, a place to warm the heart and soul as well as body. And we needed it that day: A haven, a place of refuge.

Some people you like the moment that you meet them. Like an instant recognition of two pilgrims from a distant country meeting in a foreign land. Our host was one of those, kind and competent, good and thoughtful, devoted to his family, devoted to the good things of his nation, devoted to the earth. Admittedly his love of this especial farm was an enduring affirmation of his family, a man of faith and peace.

With a sense of excellence and order, a kind of walking incarnation of all the best the "Pennsylvania Dutch" can be: skilled artisans, careful to details, excellent farmers, bright, good and deep. No stranger to sorrow, he had hurdled other obstacles along the way. Robert Frost once noted that human tragedies are like trees blown down across the road: a terrible nuisance, but not forever. First you pull away the little branches, then trim the larger ones, then saw the trunk itself, and use them all to warm the house next winter. "Thrown down," Frost said, "not to bar our passage to the journey's end, but just to ask us who we think we are..."

The hostess was a lovely lady, too, whose devotion to her home was evident and whose attachment to the beautiful and nice and neat and gentle, good and kindly things was displayed throughout the house, with a hint of all care can accomplish - excellence in cooking, skilled in artistic things, and attractive, unveiling a sense of balance, helpful and friendly - with the ability to share enough to share but something kept within, gentle and reserved, but like a deep creek which runs beneath the surface. She had the knack of looking relaxed with a houseful, to make one feel at home.

On days like that you need a home, a place where smiles and tears are both in order and where a hug can say it all, a place of love and kindness. But, even at its best, there are some days when a home is not enough, marvelous as it is. And still, I felt the burden. But, as I walked across the living room, I caught the view which brings the moment I want to tell you of this morning.....

My eyes and hurt and heart were drawn out through the enormous farmhouse window, first to the snow, then to the summer house, to the ash and oak and pine trees, then out and off and up to the York County or Susquehanna Hills where the sun was suddenly shining and where in the distance they seemed to form a protective shelter from all the wintry valley. And in that moment, luminous and clear, I felt the power of the earth descending as a special gift, my place to gain perspective. As the Psalmist said one day, "To the hills I lift my eyes"; from them shall come my help...It was my horizon. And the words came back to me, "Everybody needs a Home and an Horizon."

I don't know who first wrote them down; I first heard them from a friend. He said he read them in a book by Henry Coffin. And someone said that Dr. Coffin borrowed them from someone else...It really does not matter. But it is a haunting phrase if you ever catch it right - A Home and an Horizon. Everybody needs a place to live and be and move and talk and walk and sing and dance and cry and hope. Everybody needs a place to lay the head at night. Every person needs the love of others and a kindly welcome...The world can be a lonely place. Oh, it can break your heart, can leave you empty, hollow and afraid, and twist your highest hopes and shoot them back as arrows. The world can be an awful place, with wars and worse. And dog-eat-dog, and catch-what-can - hurrying, wasting, conniving, borrowing, stealing, running, lying, grabbing, get-

ting, giving, living, dying - noses pressed against the windowpanes looking into Eden, but shoved away each time by cherubim with flaming swords, out to toil in the dust of all the world, to work and labor 'til your days are done - no Eden here; no Eden there; no Eden anywhere.

You and I need respite from the maddening crowd. We need to find some moments made of peaceful quiet times...a home to get away to. Pity those whose home is filled with turmoil, too. You need a home - but you and I need more than that...You need a home and an horizon...

Otherwise, you will not be alive, or at least you won't be living. You will be alive - If some doctor came by you, say with a stethoscope, he would listen to the pounding heartbeat and say, "Yeah, he's alive...pulse rate steady most of the time and blood pressure up and down a bit..he's alive." But then, dogs are alive if it simply means breathing. And a rock is alive if you count its moving molecules. And rats look after fellow rats. One brown rat will almost never hurt another, unless he has gone insane. And baboons care for baby baboons, too. The whole creation lives. And every living thing has some kind of home, some territory which it marks out to keep itself and propogate its young and - Well, you know what I mean.

But you are supposed to be a man, or woman, or boy, or girl. And that means something more, made in the image of One who made it all, living with the Living Christ. Living with your eyes on distant goals and marvelous things to do and capturing a distant past as well, and pulling it together. You are supposed to be a living soul, the Bible says, something that throbs with meaning and echoes the gift of God Himself.

It is true from the moment we are born. Home in the life of a tiny baby is rather easy to define: a crib, a room, a blanket, milk and food; but the horizon is there as well. And all through childhood - and teenagers maybe know it best of all, especially those we honor today as graduates - the home is there, the place to live, sometimes good and sometimes not so good. But the horizon beckons, too, to all the future holds. And the college student knows it, away and back, and looking, hoping, searching, rooting, finding, losing, growing, falling, rising. Young couples know it, too, like the bride and groom we launched here yesterday at the Sue Stein wedding. There is a home, a place to buy and furnish, but on the horizon is a growing marriage and the hope for family, a deepening commitment, some goals to set and ways to get there.

Others know it too, or should: Home can be a bleak and awful place sometimes, but the horizon out on yonder hill is there. If you have hope or memory, Kierkegaard once said, you cannot be unhappy.

And oh, it is true, maybe most of all, when we come down near the end of the road. Still you need a home, people to love you, a place to recall the goodness God has given and the hope that, on looking back, pray God you found the life you chose, that it all has been worthwhile. But the horizon is the more important now, the place that marks the boundary where you and I can see, where our pilgrimage takes departure from the earth itself, to the unknown but waiting future. You need that vision, friends, for where there is no vision, the people perish.

And there I think you need to hear the Psalmist. He, in the middle of the deepest doldrums

of his life, when he worried for the sanity of the world and all, and the comings and goings, and when eventually he came to face his own mortality and to know that his end was on the way; this is one of the Pilgrim Songs, scholars call them, psalms the pilgrims used to say to themselves or to sing to themselves or to sing to each other as they journeyed to the Holy City. And all along the way they had to encamp in the desert and arid regions, and they usually chose the valley. And sentries were set out on yonder hill to keep watch over the encampment against the robber bands who even then preyed on passing pilgrims.

And you can also see the Psalmist, can't you, as he is just about to go into his tent at night, looking up unto the hill to see the watchman there. How comforting...a human sentry guarding the people from the hillside all around. "So I can sleep at night..." Like the funny little lady said in the air raid shelter in London, when she slept soundly; "How can you manage it?" some said. She said, "The Lord neither slumbers nor sleeps, and there's not much sense to both of us staying awake all night." It suggests stability, does it not? Like it says, "The river alone runs with a song; the mountain stays and remembers, and follows her with his love." And more than human sentry watches over us as well.

So, it is time for the marvelous sixteenth chapter of the Gospel according to John. "A little while," Jesus says, "and you will see me no more." Oh, that's for sure. A little while becomes littler with the passing years, and time keeps slipping away. A little while and the grass grows up and withers again at the end of the day. A little while and nations rise and wane. And a little while and the lone and level sands stretch far away. A little

while, and it's as if - as my wife said some years ago - it is like a series of hellos and goodbyes. You get all settled in, and it is time to go. Or some deep rumbling inside says, "Enough...Sorry about that." A little while...Oh, how those three years would have flown when they were with him. And when the time comes, Jesus says, you will weep, weep and lament. But like a woman in travail, in the labor of giving birth to a child which never was before, in a little while she no longer remembers the anguish - Jesus Christ is speaking - for the joy of a child that is born into the world. So you have sorrow now, he says.. "but I will see you again...and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will ever take your joy away again..."

A little while, and the hour is coming when you will be scattered. A little while, and wars and rumors of wars...and a little while, and the sun will eventually die out, and darkness will rule the deep. A little while, and the trilobites may rule the earth and sea again. But, "I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world..."

Oh, I went back to Pine Edge Farm one day this spring. Returning life was beginning to flourish once again, the fields in fledgling flutter with what would soon become the waving fields of grain. And the farmer's house was down the road with the summer house beside it, and a tinier house beside it, too. And the funny little metal pig with his funny outsized curly tail which serves as weather vane was moving gently on the barn roof, safe and snug and high above the fattening Hampshires and the Yorkshires who would soon be off for market. The barn swallows were darting through their chosen

paces. And the huge ash tree was still there with its gaping center hole, a reminder of what was also lost one day in a storm some years ago. The newer barn was opened to unveil its treasured collection of buckboards and surreys and horsedrawn carriages, a Studebaker without engine from before the turning of the century, and an authentic Concord, with a parasol for the ladies, and even a shiny little surrey with the fringe on top, all patiently and masterfully restored, pristine and pure.

At the entrance way above the doorway to the house, in blue Moravian tiles, are the German words from Matthew 6:21: Wo Euer Schaz Ist Da..Ist Auch Euer Herz - Where your treasure is there will your heart be also. Their treasure is there. And an unusual pyracantha climbs up the wall beside it, formed into the shape of a misplaced suguaro cactus by epoxy glue and rich imagination. The Stars and Stripes were flying on the flagpole which flies on every special day, and he said sometimes special days are simply those when friends come by.

Outside, beyond the summer house, the third generation of tenant-farmers, now half owners of the crops, were harrowing the hillsides, getting ready to plant the corn; the oats were in already, just as the Conewagos would have done for thirty times that many generations, only this year the Government conservationist was working hard to get them to plant the farm according to the rotation system he had chosen for them. Time alone will tell whether his little flags convinced them all.

And, on that Spring day, way off in the distance, out on the horizon where the hills begin to rise from the Susquehanna Valley, the hardwood forests were tall and green again: oak and hickory, hemlock firs and poplars, beech trees and some sassafras, and... oh, Lord God Almighty, out on the horizon, where they

had stood for a hundred million years, give or take a few, were the outriders from the Appalachian range, traveling south to Old Virginny, where their beauty once again emerges as the Skyline Drive...Oh, the earth is old...

Nothing we accomplish is ever finished in a lifetime; well, almost nothing anyway. We simply add our parts long or short, soon or late. All we can hope to do is contribute to the ages, to add our weight and worry, and our worship too, to what the Lord God had in mind on the day he made it all. Enter the parade to march with all our might. One day darkness ruled the deep..one day it will surely rule again..depending on the past and on the future, too.. knowing that the story of it all unfolds according to his purpose. So you and I can live with gusto and with grace...until the other day will come, as come it surely will, when like Ezekiel, we ascend that other hill, peek up and over and down the other side, to the plain and level lands, where you shall go out with joy and be led forth into peace, and the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the fields shall clap their hands. Instead of the brier shall come up the cypress. Instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle. And it shall be to the Lord for an everlasting sign which shall not be cut off. Meanwhile, Christian, courage, peace, and love. In the world ye shall have tribulation...But, be of good cheer...I have overcome the world...

Thanks to the generosity of a friend of Southminster Church, this sermon has been printed for our members and friends.