

Sexagesima (MP-2) (2020)

Let me begin by telling you a story. It comes from the early days of this congregation.

On Trinity Sunday 1990, we had what was designated “A Day in the Country”.

Members of the congregation came to church with picnic baskets in their cars.

After the morning service, people grouped up, and we headed for a tiny church on this side of Franklin, North Carolina. St. John’s Cartoogechaye is the name of the church.

It is a very picturesque board-and-batten structure, with a rustic detached bell tower out front.

In the churchyard there are a number of monuments, including one for an Indian Chief, who, along with wife, escaped and returned from the Trail of Tears.

But, the most striking thing about this church is its size. It only seats around 40 people.

Back to my story, though. According to plan, when we arrived, we had a picnic in the churchyard and then went inside for Evening Prayer.

Where I am going with this story is that afterwards, I remember distinctly a few of us having a conversation about the church we wanted to build in Blue Ridge.

At the time, St. Luke’s had a very small congregation. As a result, there was a real temptation to think small and build tiny . . . maybe even to replicate St. John’s.

As you can imagine, were chomping at the bit to get goint . . . to put something on this lot.

But thank goodness in the end better minds prevailed. We continue meeting in the city hall paying \$10 a Sunday for quite some time, and eventually built what you see today.

But, the temptation was there to charge ahead . . . to move according to our timetable and not according to God's.

And that is a perennial problem, isn't it? It happens with individuals and with churches.

It was true in Old Testament times. Think about the fiasco that happened when Abraham and Sara took this route.

God promised Abraham an heir. After a number of years, when that heir had not appeared, what did Abraham and Sara do?

They became impatient. They got tired of waiting on the Lord and took matters into their own hands. They charged ahead leaning on their own understanding.

Abraham had a son by his wife's maid, Hagar, and we know where that led. The world is still paying the price today over in the Middle East.

But we also find the same folly going on in today's Old Testament lesson.

In this passage, Isaiah tells the people of Judah how they are to respond to a national crisis, a threat coming from the Assyrian empire, which was in the ascendancy at the time and posed a real threat to their national security. Delivering God's message, the prophet says: **"In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength."**

But how were they in fact responding to this crisis?

Well, instead of waiting on God to bring about the deliverance He had promised, they were going down to Egypt seeking help there . . . busy making desperate alliances, alliances that would prove not only to be futile but disastrous.

I wonder if you have ever done anything like that in your life . . . panicked, forgot God and have taken matters into your own hands.

I wonder if you have ever been in a church where this happened. If so, today's message is for you.

There is a time for charging ahead and get on with the job, a time for daring and doing, but there is also a time for standing and waiting. The trick, I suppose, is knowing when to do what.

Some of the words found in the verse I have just quoted might help us get this right. The first is **returning**.

The very nature of this word implies we are in a place we ought not to be. Think about the prodigal son in the parable Jesus told. He found himself in a far country, far away from his family and far away from his God.

Disobedience . . . leaning on our own understanding and going our own way . . . leads us into this far county. But how does this disobedience begin and get a foothold in our lives? I want to suggest it begins with small things, such things as:

--Getting out of the habit of saying our prayers;

--Leaving our Bibles unread; and

--Getting out of the habit of attending Sunday worship.

What are we to do when we discover we have gone down this wrong path?

Well, there are only two things we can do: stay on that wrong path or do an about turn – **return**.

What about you and me this morning?

Do we have any ‘returning’ we need to do?

Have we strayed from the straight and narrow?

Do we find ourselves off in some ‘far country’?

If so, this word is for us. It is a summons: Return and be saved.

But we find a second word in this verse that might help us stay on track with God. It is **resting**.

“In returning and rest you shall be saved.”

But what does this rest look like?

Is it lying down and playing dead and waiting on God to do it all?

No, I don't think so. What is being spoken of here is resting on God's promises, and that involves slowing down. Let me give you an example from my childhood.

When I was a boy, there was in our church an older lady by the name of Mrs. Donald.

Well, Mr. Donald died. And seeing as she volunteered at the local Veterans' Hospital where there were a number of widowers, it was not hard for her to find another old codger, and that is exactly what she did. Very shortly after Mr. Donald died, she remarried.

Well, it didn't work out. How come?

Well, as I remember hearing my parents tells the story, it was because she expected her new husband to fall in line with what her first husband had done . . . to have her dinner cooked when she got home from volunteering.

Well, he had other ideas. He expected her to have his supper made at the end of the day. And so, sadly the marriage ended in divorce.

But the story does not end here. She went on to marry another old man, and the same thing happened.

There may have even been a third. I can't now remember.

In any event, some judicious 'resting' might have averted these tragedies

It may well have been God had in the wings someone who would have brought her much happiness, if he had just slowed down a little . . . if she had rested and waited and sought His counsel. ///

Returning, resting – but there is a third word or concept we find in this verse that might help. It is **remaining quiet**, listening.

I remember hearing a cathedral dean tell about a custom in his family. As many evenings as possible, the family would hold devotions.

During those devotions, they would go around the room and each person would tell God in his own words what was on his heart that day.

One evening his young son said something to this effect:

“God, I have nothing particular to report. So, I am just going to listen.”

Very profound words indeed! A little child shall lead them.

Prayer sometimes involves asking, but at others, it’s okay – in the lingo of today – just to ‘hang out’ with God. Remain quiet.

In quietness . . . shall be your confidence.

In closing, let me add a fourth ‘R’ to this list. Having returned, rested and remained quiet, we need also to be ready . . . to be ready to follow God’s lead and move at His command.

A.C. Palmer was a 19th century American hymn writer. He has bequeathed us these words:

*Ready to go, ready to stay,
Ready my place to fill;
Ready for service lowly or great,
Ready to do His will.*

An additional stanza fills out the picture.

*Ready to speak, ready to think,
Ready with heart and mind;
Ready to stand where He sees fit,
Ready His will to find.*

May this be our stance and prayer as we begin each new day.

Having done what our key verse suggests – returning, resting, remaining quiet -- let us also be ready . . . poised for service great or small.

If we do this, we are certain at the end of life's day to hear those coveted words of welcome from our Master and Maker: **Well done.**