

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario

Sunday, February 11, 2018

The Rev. Dr. David Thompson

“Divinely Guided and Protected”

Text: St. Peter said: “We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the Power and the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of His Majesty. For He received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying “This is My Son, My Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” We ourselves heard this voice from Heaven, while we were with Him on the Holy Mountain.”

St. Paul said “In life or death we belong to God.”

Four Engineering students who did not believe in divine guidance or protection, or even in God for that matter, were allowed to take a Situation Ethics course at Knox College, to complete their degree in business ethics, and all four had managed to earn straight A's so far. They were so confident of passing Monday morning's final exam that they decided to visit some friends in another city on the Sunday, do a little partying and then leave to get back in time. But they partied a little too hard and then had to sleep it off, and thus didn't make it back until Monday afternoon.

After discussing their predicament, all four were confident that they could conn the Ethics professor with the same story - that they had visited some friends out of town, but on the way back their car had developed a flat tire, the spare was flat and they therefore couldn't help missing the final exam.

After hearing their story, the professor agreed they could take the final exam the next day. The students were elated and all studied diligently that whole night for the exam. The next day the professor placed them in separate rooms, and gave each of them an exam booklet.

All four of them were able to answer the first question, worth 5 points. "A piece of cake," each one thought, "this exam is going to be a walk in the park!"

Then they turned the page and written on the second page was the second and only other question: -

"For 95 points, which tire was it that developed a flat?"

Today is the Sunday in the church year when we celebrate the Transfiguration of Jesus. His clothes became dazzling white. Moses and Elijah appeared and the disciples were nonplussed to say the least!

What do we make of this story today?

Four things I note in favor of its historicity.

1) It is in all three of the first three Historical Gospels, with St Mark being the earliest. The accounts are roughly the same in all three with St. Luke adding a couple of days which may be a way of counting in the Sabbath as well.

2) The book of Second Peter written about 65-68 AD, by tradition written by St. Peter through an editor, refers to the transfiguration as an eyewitness event.

3) The very awkward response about building booths by Peter, which is referred to in Mark's Gospel indicates St. Peter doing what he did in life. He was the sort of person who, when afraid and out of his depth, not knowing what to say, *would say something anyway*. This sort of behaviour has a real ring of authenticity to it when we remember the personality of the impetuous Peter.

4) Jesus asks that they keep this experience to themselves until after the resurrection. This is part of the Messianic secret that Mark's Gospel is anxious to proclaim as authentic to the Historical Jesus. Jesus wanted his Messiahship to be veiled and this story is part of that veil. So, let's not just dismiss this story as a myth. There are reasons to consider this central and authentic to the tradition.

There is a lot in this little story that is interesting. Why for instance choose Moses and Elijah?

There is the traditional answer that Moses was all about the Law, and Elijah was all about the prophets. Jesus was supposed to be the fulfilment of the law and the prophets, so traditionalists think that that is why they are there.

But they are there, according to the story itself, to talk about Christ's "Exodus". Yes, that is the rather strange word they used as found in the Greek text. That is the word used in the Greek for Christ's departure. The word Exodus, rarely used like this, conveyed the whole purview. It takes in the

upcoming unjust trial, the sentencing, the crucifixion and the promise of Resurrection. This was the whole enchilada of the departure from this world by Jesus that they were talking about.

But why consult with Moses and Elijah?

You will remember that Jesus was sorely pressed in the garden of Gethsemane and on the cross he asked why God had forsaken him? He was to ask that he not have to suffer but that was to be denied. After death what possible Divine protection could there be?

At one point in Elijah's life, he got depressed, thinking he was the only prophet left after Jezebel had slaughtered many prophets in Israel. He asked God whether he might not die? He laid himself down under a broom tree for shade and was awaked by an angel who had prepared a meal for him. It was not his time to die. When the famine began ravens fed him. Throughout his life Elijah could look back and see the hand of God guiding and protecting him.

Moses was the greatest Jew in History and still is so regarded today by the Jewish community. He too had suffered in a leadership position when all Israel had turned against him. He had spent years in the Wilderness. He had been rejected and had had to go into exile. He also had seen a great slice of life, living for 120 years. He knew from the inside out what it meant to be Divinely guided and Protected. To guide Israel there was a pillar of cloud by Day and of fire by night and a strange nourishing food called manna, when the Israelites were in the Wilderness.

Both Elijah and Moses had experienced an audience with God directly. After Moses was with God his face glowed.

In Knox College the window behind the chancel is known as the Shekinah window, in memory of the Glory of God. When the sun hits it, it glows. On the mountain of transfiguration, the Shekinah or Glory of God, transfigures all three of them and they become dazzling white.

Why are Moses and Elijah there? **They are the voices of trusted experience.** They are there to talk with Jesus about what was coming and who better?

We often think of Jesus as not having needs, after all he seemed to be able to do many miraculous things. But that is to underestimate his humanity. He experienced all the dark emotions as we do when we are down. He needed to pray, as we need to pray, and he needed God's guidance and Protection just like we do. So Who does God send?

Two very experienced pros, Moses and Elijah, and together they face what was upcoming... to be unjustly sentenced by a court of law to death is the worst that society could do.... And a crucifixion... a most traumatic horrible death. Was God's protection not to prevent his death? How could that be?

What was upcoming is what Isaiah had predicted long before as to the fate of the Messiah in History: "He was to be despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering and acquainted with grief. He was to be as one from whom others hid their faces. By a perversion of justice, he was to be taken away. And yet after his pains he was to be bathed in Light."

That is what they talked about. This was the second 'Exodus' that Jesus was to experience. This is what the great Moses and Elijah were tasked with. To get Jesus through this...and to give Jesus at all times the assurance, that no matter what happened, including death itself, He was still to be divinely guided and protected by God. God who lives in our reality and the next was to act in resurrection to make sure that the life of Jesus went on and his followers were to know that. Moses and Elijah were there to assure Jesus of that.

But what about you?

Have you had that sense of having God's protection over your life? That time when you woke up at the wheel to discover that you were headed across the median into an oncoming car and you swerved just in time? That time after ardent prayers had been said when a dedicated doctor literally saved your life?

Do you have that daily sense of being guided step by step? Decision after decision is made and somehow miraculously it all works out? It could be simple things like buying the right car for you or feeling that God is guiding you not to have a car and use public transport. It could be that course at University that you didn't think you needed, but hindsight showed that it was the perfect course for you?

I had a friend in California whose husband was a prominent doctor. He contacted her to say that he was flying home by Lear jet.

She immediately told him not to do that **and she absolutely insisted.** She said she had a premonition that he must come home on a regular passenger jet.

Her husband was furious, but he did not fly on the Lear. It crashed killing all aboard. This husband and wife were Christian people and they put it down to God's guidance and protection over their lives. And they were grateful.

Perhaps some of you doubt that faith in God makes any difference at all. Perhaps once you believed but now your faith is academic. You just don't know anymore. You used to pray but you have given that up. Now you are here in church because your family is here or you love the music and the friendships or the mission projects.

I invite you today to **doubt your doubts**. I invite you to be open to the possibility that indeed God does care for you and that not a sparrow falls but God is aware. I invite you to look for the coincidences in your life, for God is a God of what may appear to be coincidences but may not be at all. I invite you to trust your intuition.

In Bunyan's Pilgrims Progress Christian is on a pilgrimage to go to the Celestial City. But he falls afoul of Giant Despair who throws him in a dungeon. He languishes there until he remembers that he has a special key in his pocket called Promise. He puts the key into the lock of despair and is released to freedom.

I invite you to find *the Key called Promise* in Scripture.

Proverbs says: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart
And lean not on your own understanding;
In all your ways acknowledge Him, (or give God a place in your life)
And **He shall** direct your paths."

Jesus said: "Whatsoever things you ask for in prayer, believe that you have them already and they shall be yours."

St. Paul said "No one who believes in God will be put to shame. There is no distinction between Jew or Greek: for the same Lord is Lord of all and God is generous to all who call upon him. **For everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be rescued.**"

About answering prayer, Robert Schuller often said: Sometimes God says yes, sometimes God says no and sometimes God says slow...

Here is a story about the strengthening of faith in two men. It is God on slow...

Jack Sullivan was a welder in Boston. He was just finishing up a job before quitting time. He was crawling down into a ten-foot trench to weld a pipe and end the day. It was about 4 pm. The others had left and gone home, but Jack Sullivan wanted to finish the job. He was to weld the inside and outside of a new watermain. He did the inside first and about 4:30 he finished that and stood up to begin the outside weld. A stone fell down the side of the trench. It was a warning that Jack ignored. He stretched, turned back towards the pipe, pulled his mask down over his face.

Suddenly the bank caved in. Tons of dirt came down, crushing him against the pipe with the force of a sledge hammer. He was buried in a kneeling position with his shield slammed against the pipe. His shoulder was against the red-hot section. He couldn't move away from the pipe. His nose was bleeding. He tried to shout but the sound of his voice died in the shield. He tried to breathe more slowly to preserve the supply of oxygen. He thought he was about to die.

And so, he began to pray. He was the sort of guy who went to mass on Sunday at St. Patrick's, but not much more.

He kept praying. All but the fingers of one hand were buried below the rubble. He still had the arc welder in his hand and he could make a flash with it he thought by touching a piece of metal. Perhaps passersby would notice this buried hand and the flash. No luck. Nobody paid attention.

He had no idea how long he had been there. His prayers became more focussed: "God send someone."

In another part of Boston, a man was driving home from a job. He worked for the same company that Jack did, but this day at another location. They were very close friends. Tommy did not know that Jack was on the other job.

Tommy was going to go directly home that day down route 128. He should be able to get home in a few minutes he thought. But as he drove *he got a feeling that something was not right*. He tried to shake the feeling off. But the strange sensation grew. He thought he might go up to the Washington street job just to check it, but then dismissed the idea. It meant driving 6 miles out of his way in rush hour. He approached the intersection of Washington and route 28, and almost against his will he turned. He didn't try to explain it to himself. He just turned.

Meanwhile Jack continued to pray the same simple prayer: “God send someone!”

The blood in his nose was congealing and sticking in his throat and he was having a lot of trouble breathing. His welding motor was still running. As long as that ran and did not run out of gas he felt he had a chance.

Tommy drove down Washington Street. The job was divided into two sections and so he stopped at the first section. He talked with the engineer for about 15 minutes. It was now 5:45.

In the trench Jack thought it might be dark outside now. He thought that the welding flashes might be more visible but actually it was still broad daylight. He kept praying. “God send someone!”

Tommy got into his truck, said goodbye to his friend at the first part of the job site and went to the second. The gnawing sensation grew very much stronger inside of him. He could have taken a shortcut for home, but something forbade it, and so he continued up Washington Street.

Underground, Jack finally gave up with the torch. It was making him breathe too hard.

Tommy arrived at the spot and saw nothing unusual. He noticed the welder was still running. Then Tommy suddenly caught sight of the hand and it was moving. “Oh God!” he whispered.

He dug with his hands. The earth was too packed. He shut off the welder and raced across the traffic to a garage.

Jack below heard the welder shut off. He thought it had run out of fuel. He wouldn't be able to get anyone's attention now. And so, he prepared to die.

Tommy, just a few feet away, shouted to the men from the garage to get a shovel because a man was buried alive. He ran back to the hand but still did not know it was Jack's.

The shovel arrived. Tommy began to dig. He saw a wrist watch which he thought he recognized. He uncovered the man's side and saw that he was still breathing although very weakly.

Then he recognized that it was Jack! He dug more frantically.

A stretcher arrived with an ambulance and Jack was taken out of the trench and put on it.

Jack suddenly spied Tommy and asked “Who found me?” “I did,” said Tommy.

Jack's lips formed just one word. It was meant for God and Tommy.

“THANKS!”

Protection for Jack involved Guidance for Tommy.

It is my faith that we too can be Divinely Guided and Protected on both sides of death.

For St. Paul said “In life or death we belong to God.”

In my own life experience Divine Guidance and Protection have so often come together! May it be so for you!

Amen.