

THE GREATEST SERMON EVER
Reflections on Clarence Edward Macartney's Sermon "Come Before Winter"
January 5, 2013 – New Year Communion Service -- II Timothy 4: 9-22
The Church of the Covenant

It would be ego most foul to entitle one's own sermon, "*The Greatest Sermon Ever*". So this sermon title is NOT a reference to my own sermon; it is referring to a sermon preached by the great Presbyterian pulpiteer, Clarence Edward Macartney, entitled "*Come Before Winter*", truly one of the greatest sermons ever. According to his long time secretary, Edith Thompson, he preached it every October save one at the Sunday evening service; he preached it at his prior church in Philadelphia prior to coming to Pittsburgh in 1927. He preached it after he retired. It is safe to say he preached it a minimum of 60 times. But people never tired of hearing it. He preached it to standing room only crowds at First Church in downtown Pittsburgh –even the balconies would be filled to overflowing when he preached, "*Come Before Winter*". Grown men would weep; hard-hearted financiers, repent. He retired in 1953 –to put that in perspective –the year BEFORE I was born. It is still the most requested sermon ever. It is a rare week that goes by when someone will not request a copy of it. It is the most plagiarized sermon ever, as well. Many the young foolish preacher has preached it as his own only to be reminded of his sin. Macartney passed away in 1957 –to put it in perspective –when *Eisenhower* was president. But when *Time Magazine* publishes a list of the greatest American preachers to this day, he still makes the list, 55 years after his death.

It is why I call it *The Greatest Sermon Ever*, preached by arguably the greatest preacher ever...But why is that????

I suppose one could argue just preach a great sermon more than 40 times and even the most dense dullard will remember it. But if I preached my best sermon twice in two years the session would be asking Personnel to review my contract! "*Come Before Winter*" IS a great sermon but many's the great sermon lies in a bin gathering dust 50 years after its author has met his Maker. Why does it still have power to claim the human heart? Why does it live long after its author has passed into eternity? Why?

-It is its theme --It is about HUMAN REGRET; *universal* human regret. It is about all the "what should have beens", "what I wished I had dones"; the wouldas and couldas and shouldas of life; it is about good human intentions unmatched by human deeds. It is so very *true*. It is why it is the "*Greatest Sermon Ever*"...

I. The Significance of Coming Before Winter:

The Apostle Paul is writing perhaps his most poignant letter to his beloved "son in the Lord", Timothy. Paul has no children of his own. "*My son in the faith*" says Paul of Timothy. So Timothy is his spiritual son, even as Paul is Timothy's spiritual father. Traipse the lonely fields of ministry with a brother in Christ and find a friend that is closer than a brother. This letter to Timothy is no mere letter; it is a letter from father to son. Paul must know he is at that end of his ministry, his time like his Savior's is about to be delivered up unto martyrdom, death and eternity. He has "*fought the good fight*", he is about to finish the race. He knows what is

coming. It is the long winter of death; the time when all time is eternal. Paul knows as he writes this letter to his spiritual son what is on the near horizon. Not spring, not summer but the cold winds of winter come.

As Macartney so brilliantly points out, Paul bids Timothy to “*come before winter*” (*II Timothy 4: 21*) because once the winter falls over the Mediterranean then the storms come and travel is impossible. There is a brief window of opportunity for Timothy to come, if he comes *now*, if he drops what he is doing *now*, if he immediately comes and comes before winter *now*...then he can see his spiritual father in the Lord. But the unspoken parenthesis in what Paul is also saying is that if he does not come now then perhaps Paul will not be there –perhaps he will be given up into martyrdom and death. Perhaps the opportunity to “come” will cease when the winter winds blow. “*The time of my departure is at hand*”.

Macartney writes –“*Before winter or never! There are some things which will never be done unless they are done “before winter.” The winter will come and the winter will pass, and the flowers of the springtime will deck the breast of the earth, and cover the graves of some of our opportunities, perhaps the grave of our dearest friend. There are golden gates*”, he writes, “*open on this autumn day, but next October they will be forever shut...There are voices speaking today which a year from today will be silent. Before winter or never!*” (Come Before Winter, pp. 7-8)

The great sadness of Paul’s life is that he who so loved people and was surrounded by so many brothers and sisters in the Lord throughout his life, this same Paul is now almost completely alone. Hear his plaintive cry when he writes, “*Only Luke is with me...*” At his time of imprisonment, all the rest have deserted him. Just as with his Lord Jesus Christ, when the cross comes the disciples flee.

So he concludes this letter with a sad plea, the seemingly strong and implacable Paul who seemingly has no need other than for the presence of God, now needs friendship, companionship, a flesh and blood reminder that his life has not been lived in vain, that the gospel will continue even after winter comes, that what has been sown into the heart of the young Timothy will not be forgotten, but that the gospel for which Paul has lived and for which he is about to die, will live, will live in Timothy, will live in the hearts and minds of tens of tens of thousands of Timothies whom Paul has never met. He writes to every young Timothy –“*Come...do thy diligence to come shortly unto me...Do thy diligence to come before winter.*” (*II Timothy 4: 9, 21*)

II. Timothy Never Comes:

But to our knowledge, from our biblical source, Timothy never comes. Therein lies regret. Therein lies the universal theme that so tugs at the human heart. Litanies of deep regret --What might have been, what might have been, The saddest line of word or pen –what might have been, what might have been...

Macartney has this pivotal and brilliant moment in his sermon when he writes, “*Every time the jailer put the key in the door of his cell, Paul thought you were coming, (Timothy)*” (*ibid.*, p.14) Every time Paul heard footsteps out in the cold corridor Paul must have thought –“Is that you, Timothy? Is that you my beloved son in the Lord?” Even as the jailers came to take Paul away

to sever his head and still the pen that wrote epistles of grace and life, even then he must have heard the sound of footsteps in the hall. Did he not ask –“Is that you, Timothy? Is that you? Have you come at last?”

I am sure Timothy was well-intentioned in his efforts to come before winter. We are well-intentioned people after all. He endeavored first to put all his affairs in order and then perhaps to come. But as he focused on his tasks instead of his friend the time came when the boats no longer set out in winter. He had missed the opportunity. The window of opportunity opened just a crack and for just a short time and then closed. Forever. Or perhaps he told himself, “O there, will be another spring for Paul.” “To be sure I cannot come before THIS winter but I can come before NEXT winter.” “I will think up all the things we shall speak to one another about and then before next winter I shall come. What a glorious time it shall be THEN”. But tomorrow never came. Winter came and winter went. But Timothy did not come and Timothy did not go. And Paul was not to be there another winter. There was never another time for Timothy and Paul to speak. The son for whom the spiritual father often wept great spiritual tears would now weep tears of his own, tears of profound emptiness and of a profounder regret.

As Macartney writes, imagining the scene when Timothy arrives following winter, a disciple asks of Timothy –“*And are you Timothy? Don’t you know Paul was beheaded last December?...His last message was for you, ‘Give my love to Timothy, my beloved son in the faith, when he comes.’*” (Ibid., p. 14) All the tears shed in that moment could not wash away the regret in his heart. Human regret for all that has been left undone, unsaid, unfinished. All the well-intentioned wishes that never came to be. This sermon captures it all –it is why it is *The Greatest Sermon Ever...*

III. A Season of Regret or a Season of Hope?:

My best friend from college died sixteen years ago of colon cancer. I call his family on the anniversary of his death every year; it is an easy date to remember. He passed away on All Saints Day, November 1st. He had been raised in a Presbyterian Church, had gone through Confirmation Class and had been active in the church youth group in growing up. But somewhere along the way he fell away from faith; he questioned the faith of his youth. In conversations we would have over the years he would say that he would have to feel “good enough and worthy enough” and then he would come back to God. I never pressed him on that; never pressed him on the issue of Jesus. He was a great friend to me over the years, a far, far better friend to me than I ever was to him. I was just about to be called to a church in the Washington, DC area and looked forward to reconnecting with him and his family. I called him in August to tell him I was being called to a church in Alexandria, Virginia. He said at that time he wasn’t feeling very well and thought it was a stomach bug. He called me in September to let me know he had been diagnosed with colon cancer and for me to pray for him. Periodically, I would call him on the phone to talk. But I felt that with my arrival time being November 1st that I would see him. I was so sure he would recover. I arrived in Virginia on October 31st with my family and moving van in tow. There was a call waiting from his family –they asked me to come and pray with him and be part of the decision whether to take him off life support or not. I had thought there was plenty of time. I had thought I had come before winter. I had just enough time to enter his room and to pray with him and to speak with him about eternity and eternal life

and Jesus. He smiled at me; I do believe he knew I was there. But more than that I do not know. The next day he died. My first act as pastor of my new church was to conduct the funeral of my best friend. *We always think there is plenty of time. But sometimes there is just plenty of regret.* Do not wait until it is too late. Do not wait until after the last ship has departed. Do not wait to speak to a friend or loved one about the most important things in life and death. Do not wait to speak to someone you love about Jesus. I now turn to better words, those of Clarence Macartney. He wrote:

“Come before the haze of Indian summer has faded from the fields! Come before the November wind strips the leaves from the trees and sends them whirling over the fields! Come before the snow lies on the uplands and the meadow brook is turned to ice! Come before the heart is cold! Come before desire has failed! Come before life is over ...and you stand before God to give an account of the use you have made of the opportunities which in (God’s) grace he has granted to you! Come before winter!” (Ibid., p. 21)

Come! Come to Jesus! Come to this table! Bring your failings and your regrets. Bring the missed opportunities of your life. Bring all the things you wished you had said; wished you had done. Bring them all and put them as an offering before the Lord in whom all things find their completion, in whom there is no regret, only hope, only peace.

I end with this –it is a flight of fancy; mere speculation, so please forgive me. Imagine the Apostle Paul is now in heaven. With Christ, prisoners leap to lose their chains, nothing binds him any more, and there is no more sorrow, nor regret for the tears have been wiped from his eyes by merciful Jesus and the former things, passed away. And Paul hears footsteps out in that hallway of heaven. He turns and cocks his head just a little. He says: “Timothy, my spiritual son in the Lord, is that you?” “Yes, Paul, it is I. I did not come before winter to my life’s regret. But, oh, I did come to Jesus. And HE is my life’s joy and crown!” *Imagine, imagine now the Apostle’s tears of JOY!*

Come to this table. Come to this Savior. Do not wait until you feel good enough. Do not wait until you feel worthy enough. Do not wait until you have it all figured out in your mind. Just come. **Come Before Winter** and know why these three words written by the Apostle—“come, before, winter”-- are the *Greatest Sermon Ever!!!!*
Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*

Note: I am deeply indebted to Gerald Moran, head librarian of Geneva College, Miss Edith Thompson, long time and faithful secretary to Dr. Macartney (herself gone on to be with the Lord), and to Miss Margaret Markel, friend and history-lover of First Presbyterian Church Pittsburgh, (also now in heaven) for the inspiration for this sermon.