

Sunday Sermon: Setting a Course for the Spiritual Life
Jeremiah 1:4-10, Psalm 71:1-6, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, Luke 4:21-30
January 31, 2010
Trinity Episcopal Church
The Rev. Charles A. de Kay

May God's will be done today. By each and every one of us. Amen.
Please be seated.
Good morning!

Business man, philanthropist, and author Chris Gardner was in town recently to speak at the Paramount. Perhaps you went and heard him speak? Perhaps some of you have read his book, or seen the movie based on it, both entitled, *The Pursuit of Happyness*. If so, did you notice the religious undercurrent running through his life and work? It's understated in the movie, but there. For instance, one of the film's great moments comes at a gospel service. Another happens as Mr. Gardner (played by Will Smith) listens as his son (played poignantly by Will Smith's own son, Jaden) tells this joke:

There was a man who was drowning, and a boat came, and the man on the boat said "Do you need help?" and the man said "God will save me". Then another boat came and he tried to help him, but he said "God will save me", then he drowned and went to Heaven. Then the man told God, "God, why didn't you save me?" and God said "I sent you two boats, you dummy!"

God is here. God is sending us boats.

But sometimes we're so busy looking for something specific, something exotic, something "special" we can't see God's outstretched hand in the here-and-now. Or we're so cut off from the spirit that we twist the light to reflect our own darkness, seeing vindictiveness and violence in grace – gifts and unearned blessings for us from God. Or sometimes, we're just looking the other way and refuse to turn around.

We heard the story of the call of the prophet Jeremiah, who begins as a young man. He balks at God's invitation at first, because of his age and inexperience. I wonder if he imagined how he'd be received by the leaders of the community – religious and otherwise. This is not an issue isolated to the ancient world. Our church is well known today for turning away would be candidates for leadership, simply because they are too young. We must have a lot of faith in our idea of what the particular package looks like, as we reject people's sense of God's call.

In today's Gospel passage, Jesus reads the skepticism of his family and hometown neighbors toward him and his message, a rejection growing inside their hearts, almost before they themselves can articulate it. Jesus reminds these friends and neighbors of the great prophets before him -- Elijah and Elisha – whose Word was rejected by the people of God, so these messengers of God were sent outside the community of faith to gentiles who would listen to them and profit from the experience. Jesus' words anger the crowd of men and women who should love him best to the point of a homicidal rage, they get up, drive him out of town, with the intention of throwing him off the cliff. But he simply passes through the midst of them and goes on his way.

I wonder. Is it possible that sometimes we shut God out, too?

What might be some of the things that keep us from hearing God's voice, from valuing God's messengers in our own lives? Jesus is dealing here with familiarity. Familiarity is said to breed contempt. That sure was true in first century Nazareth. These people knew Jesus too well to take him seriously as coming from God's heart. When we know someone very well, can we see them as messengers of God?

In AA, that extraordinarily successful program which every day leads bull-headed, unhealthy people to an experience of God, their classic text uses just one and only one external quote to illuminate the human barriers to connection with God: the quote appears in the appendix on the "spiritual

experience” in which 19th-century philosopher Herbert Spencer is quoted: “There is a principle which is a bar against all information, which is a proof against all arguments and which cannot fail to keep a man in everlasting ignorance – that principle is contempt prior to investigation.”¹

Can you hear God calling you? God has a calling for each of us. God has a calling for you.

Can you hear it? Is your heart open to hear God’s call?

If it doesn’t come easily, what do you think might be keeping you from delving deeper into your relationship with God? Is it contempt prior to investigation? Is it doubt, fear, or cynicism? Is it ignorance, lack of fluency – lack of the language to hear, understand, and speak about it?

This year Trinity’s going to try something we haven’t done for a while. In addition to our midweek Bible study, we’re going to study the story of the Bible on Sunday mornings at 8 and 10:30. We’re going to read an abridged version of Bible called, appropriately, *The Story: Read the Bible as One Seamless Story from Beginning to End*. By the end of this year, everyone who participates will know, understand, and appreciate the overall movement of the Bible – from the Garden to the City, from the first creation to the last – and all of the major players. We’ll learn what happened when, and in what order. We’ll begin to know who’s who. We’re going to attempt to get fluent in the Word.

Now, understanding that different people learn differently, we’ll mix it up with a variety of speakers and discussion leaders, with video, and music, with props and stories. We’ll be as creative as the people who show up. It should be entertaining. And I believe it’s going to be enlightening. I think we’ll learn something about ourselves and about each other along the way.

Where are you on your journey? Would you like to go deeper into the Spiritual life? I only know three ways – be a part of a worshipping community, read and reflect on the Word of God, and pray. When we find a little time each week to do a little of all three, they have a wonderful way of informing each other, strengthening the other pieces, and awakening parts of ourselves. Parts that matter. Parts that make life worth living. Parts that help us to make meaning of our lives. Parts that help us to see how we are part of something much bigger than our daily concerns.

Or we can sit on the sidelines, slowly drowning as we reject one boat after another. I believe that there’s a new lifeboat being launched this morning. Climb on board. We’re sailing for nothing less than a glimpse of the heart of God, and you would bless us with your presence. Take a chance won’t you?

Whatever you choose, I pray that none of us will so ignore the flotilla of boats God launches that we let God pass through the midst of us and through the midst of our lives, and go on his way (looking for more fertile soil in which to plant the seed, looking for open, listening hearts that are more receptive to the message), as Jesus did in Nazareth. As Elijah did. As Elisha did.

May 2010 be a time of spiritual awakening and renewal for you and for me. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousand Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism. Third Edition. New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. 1976, page 570.