

August 19, 2001

“THE HERO IN THY SOUL” “Do not neglect the gift of God which is within you!” I Timothy 4:14

Some of you will be surprised, even alarmed maybe, when I tell you where I found the title for this sermon. I was taken by the sentence when I first read it forty years ago back in college. I never forgot it, even if I have never tried to preach on it before. It comes from the arch-atheist of all time. Frederick Wilhelm Nietzsche, the German philosopher of the late nineteenth century. He died in 1900. He was a brilliant man whose father and grandfather were both successful German Protestant Ministers: honorable, pious, cheerful, and happy people. Yet, Nietzsche rejected almost everything his family stood for. He scornfully attacked the bulwarks of the Christian faith. Some say his honesty leads his readers to a higher religion. But Hitler did not see it that way, and neither do I! Hitler became a devoted follower of Nietzsche, as he also did of the composer Wagner.

Well, enough of Nietzsche! Almost. His best known, and most challenging I think, is called (in English) Thus Spoke Zarathustra. There he spelled out his philosophy, including his concept of the "superman," who became the model for Hitler's doctrine of Arian supremacy.

It is there that I read the sentence, which now comes to you as the sermon topic of the morning. Nietzsche wrote: "I charge you not to cast away the Hero in Thy Soul." I charge you not to cast away the hero in your soul. Thomas Carlyle once added from an opposite point of view: "Not by flattering our appetites; not by easy sayings; "...no, but by awakening the hero that slumbers in every heart, can religion do its work."

My concern today, in the words of Saint Paul as he writes to his young friend Timothy, is that we should "Stir up the Gift of God which is within us." There is magic, a gift of magic in each child of God. My observation as pastor is that in many cases people overlook the gift and march along his/her merry way without searching for it, and finding it in their inner souls. Consequently, they do not become the very best that they can be. It does not matter what age you are, or where you have been in the past, or where you are just now, or however pleased or puzzled you are with yourself; you can stir up the gift of God which is within you and refuse to cast away the Hero in Thy Soul.

The Bible often speaks about the special unique and individual gift that God gives to each of us. *I Corinthians 7:7* says, "Each one of us has a special gift from God, one of one kind, one of another." *I Peter 4:10* advises, "As each one has received the gift, employ it for one another." In Paul's letters to Timothy, he is encouraging Timothy to use his gift of faith. "I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is within you." (*II Timothy 1:6*) The special gift is always there. If you cannot find it right now, if you have allowed the debris of the years to cover it over, if it is not on the surface of your hearts and hopes then what you need to do is refuse to become discouraged, and stir it up a little.

The other reference in *I Timothy 4:14* reads, "Do not neglect the gift you have which was given to you by prophetic utterance." Paul is referring here to Timothy's ordination to the Gospel ministry. The gifts God gave him were teaching and preaching.

In *I Corinthians 12:4*, Paul says it succinctly, "There are a variety of gifts, but the same spirit; there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspired them all, in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the Common good."

For example: to one was given the utterance of Wisdom, to one the utterance of Knowledge (I am never sure what the difference is between Wisdom and Knowledge), to another is given Faith, to another gifts of Healing, to another the working of Miracles, and to still another Prophecy.

In *I Timothy 4*, Paul is discussing the duties of younger Christians, especially. Paul bids them to capitalize on the spiritual power with which they have been endowed. We have not been noted for a large percentage of young people here at the Chapel. But we are improving in that regard. I call special attention to Paul's concern that younger Christians have the assigned duty to grow in the faith. He writes: "Meditate on these things; give yourself wholly to them; so that all may see your progress." (*I Timothy 4:15*) In other words, find your gift and give yourself to it.

"Gift" in Saint Paul's use of the word means a special endowment bestowed by the Holy Spirit. In the colloquial language of today, this would translate to say that God has a particular purpose for each of us in His world: in our work, in our family, in the family of man, but also in this Chapel. Robert Browning once wrote: "Life has its meaning; to find it is our meat and drink." You need to stir it up a little.

One Timothy translation of the words, which we have accepted as "Stir Up The Gift of God Which Is Within You," could come out as "I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you." Rekindle... lovely word.

When we lived in Scotland back in the 1960's while I was doing my Ph.D. in St. Andrews, we lived at "Castlegate," a four hundred year old stone house directly across the Street from the Saint Andrews Castle, and more importantly the North Sea. Now that might sound quite idyllic, and a grand place to live but Peggy will remind you that since it is foggy so much of the time on the North Sea; and since it frequently rains; and since the Southeast cold winds never go away; and since the stones in that house had four centuries of time to store up the wet-cold, it was not long before she was looking for another place to stay.

Anyway, there was no central heating in Castlegate. The only heat we could muster was out of the coal fires in each of three rooms, minus the kitchen and the bathroom. I was in charge of the coal fires. For the first little while, I was inept and usually the fires I banked at night were out by the next morning. (Now be patient, this story is going somewhere...) But in a short time, prompted by the cold wet winds off the North Sea, I became proficient in banking the three coal fires with such skill that the red embers were usually there when I got up. I just needed to stoke it a little, to stir it up. Even if you could not see the fire, it was there in waiting for the sunrise. I thought of that this week as I prepared this sermon. The flame is always there, or the potential for the flame is if you stir it up and let it out.

That is an almost universal problem in the faith. With recent converts, the enthusiasm first burns brightly for entire world to see and hear. (You only need to listen!) And then quietly it recedes and becomes an ember of what it used to be. It happens to the young who receive a vision of what their lives could mean. Then they settle into a whole lot of other demands, and duties, and excitements, and occupations, and outside commitments, which bring honor and fame and money and the appreciation of their peers. Then they dart off after this or that, or the other thing. They run without direction, like a puppy circling himself. It happens; but it does not happen only to the young. The fires of enthusiasm burn out with all the rest of us, too.

The word rekindle in Greek also can be translated "fan into flames again," which means it is not a matter of starting up a fire. Once God has given the gift, He will guard it from being extinguished completely. You only need to rekindle it.

You might be familiar with the Xanth writings of the English Novelist Piers Anthony, far and away the best-known fantasy novelist in recent years, until J. Rowling came along. An Englishman by birth, he became an American citizen who lived in Florida for a while, he was publishing books at the astonishing rate of three per year, most of which are intriguing stories in the mythical land of Xanth. (Maria Gellert, my corresponding secretary at one time, introduced me to Piers Anthony!) My favorite book is called [A Spell For Chameleon](#). It is the story of a Xanthian named Bink, (Everybody has a nick-name in Xanth) a delightful little man in the fantasyland. He reminds me of [The Hobbit](#), Bilbo Baggins, famous in J. R.

Tolkein's Lord of The Rings, of which I was a devoted disciple 40 years ago. It also rings the bell of some of the charming characters in the fantasy writings of C. S. Lewis. In more recent days, you might jump to the antics of Harry Potter and his Goblet of Fire.

The remarkable thing about Xanth is that everyone has a special gift of magic, everybody. In the terrors of the deep, dark, dangerous forest, through which Bink has to travel dozens of magical gifts appear; sometimes forwarding the progress of Bink's travels and sometimes holding him back.

Sour magic is often used to try to keep Bink from arriving at the castle of the Good Magician Humpfrey, where he is heading to find his gift. The pity of it all is that Bink, as bright and attractive as he is, has not yet found his gift of magic. And time is running out. The law in the land of Xanth is that each resident must discover and demonstrate his/her gift of magic by their twenty-fifth birthday, or that person is ushered out of Xanth and is exiled forever from the magical kingdom. Bink was moving closer and closer to his twenty-fifth birthday and he had found no gift inside himself. So, off he went in search of his magic gift. You might say, in our culture that he was one of those late bloomers, or one who never found it. Some gifts of magic are awesome, perilous even.

The evil magician Trent, for example, has the power of Transformation; that is, he can turn people (Transform them) into anything he chooses. I admit that there are times I wish I had that gift. In one case however, he turned a boy named Justin into a tree, then forgot all about him.

I told you once not long ago in a different context, that my favorite Xanth gift is the gift of Bianca, Bink's mother. It was called "replay." Not like a football replay that you will soon begin to see again this time of year. She could actually replay life. She could turn the clock back five seconds any time she chose; that's all, a total of five seconds. In other words, she could cancel the previous five seconds. That might not sound like much either, but ponder it a minute. If you could erase the last five seconds: accidents could be prevented; harsh words need never be heard; evil thoughts could disappear. Just five seconds worth of magic....

Bink found his gift, by the way. With that, Piers Anthony sparked my imagination to think about the magic in the people I know. That is a sound Biblical quest. Everyone has some precious, wonderful, endearing gift, without which the world would be a poorer place indeed. Magic too.... It is a never-ending search.

That was one of the marvelous talents of Jesus. Wherever He went, He lifted people up; He gave them new hope, and new lives.

For example: Peter, Andrew, James, and John were ordinary fishermen down by the Galilean seaside. The Bible does not tell you any of the details, but you can piece them together. They must have been restless. What they were doing on the sea was not enough to fulfill their psyche and their souls. Jobs are fine, or fair to middlin, or not so fine, ordinary, routine. Who knows why they left it all?

But you know the feeling, don't you? The routine of work day-in and day-out; too much to do and not enough time to do it; and nobody seems to appreciate it anyway; and you don't feel fulfilled anyway. Cromie's second law says: "Whatever you do, it isn't enough!" The father of Peter and Andrew was in charge of the business. Family businesses have their own peculiar pressures; if you have ever been in one, you know what that means. And the fishing was not very good anyway. Too many boats for too few fish.... If you had asked, "Hey, lads, what's going on? Is your life magical and fine?" They would have said, "No, we don't know. We are bored. We need something new to do. Enough of this fishing!"

Then along came Jesus. How did He know that these four would be His first disciples? He told them to come with Him. "You are fishers of fish, I will make you fishers of men." And it says, "They left everything they had and followed Him." Why? I think they saw who He was and believed in Him. I think they knew instinctively that He could bring their best out in them, and He did. Jesus released their gifts. He helped them to discover what they wanted to do.

Then there was the woman at the well who had been taken in adultery so many times she had lost count. She tried marriage five times; it never worked! She was currently living with a man that was not her husband. Jesus said, "My dear, I know you are unhappy. I can see it in your eyes. You have come to this well to fetch some water. I will give you the Water of Life, and you will never thirst again. I want to help you find your gift and to stir up the original magic, which is in you." She no longer needed a man to make her whole, or anyone else. He taught her to make it on her own.

A few years ago I was fascinated with Katherine Power, a woman who had been one of the F.B.I.'s most wanted criminals for twenty-three years. On September 20, 1970, back when everything was going sideways, she was involved with a robbery that resulted in the murder of a police officer. Others with her had been caught through the years, but she disappeared for so long that the authorities discontinued the search. She ended up in Oregon, living an ordinary life in a modest home with a new husband and family and many friends. No one knew who she was except herself, and The Lord.

Then one day she turned herself in. No one recognized her and no one sent the police to find her. She was not apprehended. She came by herself. Someone asked her, "Why didn't you just stay there where you were safe?" She said that the longer time passed, the more guilty and sorry she felt. "I had to come, so that I could set my heart and mind and soul at ease." You can't live a lie forever. They sentenced her to prison. I think she was relieved.

Then there was a lonesome little widow. She was poor, as many widows are the way inflation goes. You cannot live in style on a pension that was set twenty-five or thirty years ago. It is hard to make ends meet. The light of her magic had grown dim. But she was still trying, still faithful, still searching.

Up to the temple she went one day and put her two copper coins in the offering tray. She was embarrassed because some man at the same time was there lavishing his great gifts upon the altar. He gave with a flourish: "Hey, lookee here!" She quietly put in her two little coins. Jesus noticed her out of the corner of His eye. She was about to find her magic once again. "Your gift," He said, "is worth more than all the others put together."

The Bible does not say it, but I think she felt a little excitement inside her soul that she had not felt for years. I think she went home and had the happiest little meal since the day her husband died. I think she slept soundly all through that night.

So my question for you, my friends, is "Will you allow Him to touch your life anew?" Will you allow Him to turn you around so that you can find the gift that is within you? I know many people who have lost their magic. I sometimes lose it myself. There are times for all of us when we wonder whether it is all worth it; whether the present problem will ever end; whether you will ever be able to laugh and jump for joy again.

It often happens when death intrudes. A friend of mine said, "I don't care if school keeps or not." It happens when someone you love disappoints you, or when you disappoint them. It happens when your wife or husband does not understand what you are going through, or when a parent does not understand your need to be yourself, or when a friend leaves for greener pastures.

It can surely happen in a rough divorce, or illness can do it to you. Sometimes it just happens with the passing of the years. But, the magic goes away; the zest for success dwindles.

Spiritually too, I see people lose their gift. They get careless. They drop out of church for some small slight. They hold grudges against the Lord for things they think He failed to do. They begin to question everything. They lose their enthusiasm for excellence. Pity...

Think about it, and pray about it before we go. What gift might God be trying to stir up in you? What ember rekindling? It could be a hobby, a passion for painting, for writing, for sculpting, for reading.

It could be the gift of kindness, of patience, of love. It could be the gift of your tired old marriage. The gift comes in as many shapes and sizes as the number of people in the world. It could be the gift of seeing something good in every individual you meet. It could be the gift of just helping other people find their gift, or the gift of a calm spirit. Whatever, whichever, whenever... it could be time that you begin to stir it up again.

And it becomes critical at this point, urgent, ominous! In his book on The Prayer of Jabez, Dr. Wilkinson writes of the large and overfilled room in heaven. One man came across this room when his life on earth was through. "What is this?" he asked his guide, "this room is filled and overflowing?"

"Oh it makes you want to weep," the angel said, "this is the room filled with the gifts, which no one ever claimed. They were here for the asking, all the while. There are individual names on each and every package.... No one ever asked for them. So, here they sit." For now and forever more. Amen.

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