

April 21, 2002

“THE THINGS THAT NEVER HAPPENED”

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life...”

Psalm 23:6

Sometime just after the last New Year’s Day, I began to read again some of the recollections and memoirs of Jimmy Carter, our former President, who distinguished himself in many ways in that high office, and in other important ways ever since. He was displaced and defeated in his attempt for a second term by a man named Ronald Reagan. It seems an eternity ago, but it was barely twenty years back. “Funny how time slips away,” even when you are not having fun. Here it is already near the end of April 2002. Years ago I mentioned to my Dad how quickly time seemed to fly. He smiled and said quietly, “Just you wait and see.”

Well anyway, I sort of borrowed my sermon title this morning from President Carter. He relates how he was interviewed a couple of weeks after Reagan won the election. He was asked about this and that, why he had lost, what went wrong, and what he felt like on the night he had to concede to the former Governor of California and plan to pack up and leave the White House.

Next, they asked him how he thought historians would remember his Presidency, and more especially how he wanted to be remembered by the people of America in the days and decades to come. His answer provides the backdrop of what I want to share with you and have you think about with me this morning. Jimmy spent a little time describing some of the things of which he was proudest. Then after a brief recitation of the positive things he had accomplished, he went on to say, ...however, one thing that hurts me and makes me angry is that no one ever talks or writes about “the things “which never happened.” Those are the things that took most all of my time and energy in the whole four years I was President. (I am paraphrasing from memory.) For example: war never came. The President’s role in protecting and maintaining the peace of the United States of America, I accepted as my full time, number one, chief-of-all occupation. There were a number of times when we could have stumbled into conflict, but we didn’t. And, no atomic weapons were dropped, etc., etc.

“Neither do they remember how much we cared about and acted in behalf of the common people in America.” The strong really have no need for a President to take care of them; they can take care of themselves. It is the weak, the little people, the poor, the lonely and the lost who need his leadership. They were not forgotten on my watch. And no one ever thanks us for that either. The common man was not abandoned. The things which never happened are as important as the things which do. (Are you listening?)

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The things that never happened. Have a look at some of them now in your life, as we move to the heart of the sermon. In your home or business or community, in your family and your personal life, how important are the things which never happened?

If you are a parent, you know what I mean. All the times you cared and put yourself on the line for your children, all the times you prayed for them, all the fuss it took until you finally got them to adulthood. Privately you say, “Thank God. How did we do it? I don’t even know.” Think of all the things that never happened to them because you cared so much: you got them off to school; you taught them in spite of themselves; you kept them safe; you loved them even when they seemed unlovable. You even made a nuisance of yourself in guiding and directing and nudging them on; sometimes a little more than a nudge. It would have been easier not to confront them.

Every child knows it, too, although from a different perspective. The things that never happened. “You make one mistake,” the little girl told me, “and they talk as if the world is going to end. What about all the times I did it right? What about all the nights I came home on time? And what about all the homework that I did on my own? And what about the times I remembered to say, Thank you?” The things that never happened, you might say, are always overlooked.

Every wife and mother knows it too. I talked to a woman years ago, but I never forgot her words: “Every since John left, sometimes, some days it takes everything I have just to get dinner ready on the table. I am so much at odds within myself trying to make meaning out of a life that seems meaningless, I sometimes work non-stop just to finish the routine chores on time. I am so busy working full-time. Then add a full time homemaker and mother position, and I am exhausted. Mercedes McCambridge once said, after many years of her struggle with addiction: “I recommend that at the end of every day you applaud for yourself just because you made it through another day.” When you think of all the things that could and do happen, it is a miracle that some make it through another day. These are great times but we live them too fast.

Every husband knows it, too. All the times you tried to care for your family, to bring home the bacon; the times you tried so hard to be the kind of husband and father you wanted to be, but you were so busy trying to do this and that, and you were not doing it all right; and yet you hoped that someone would remember the things that never happened because you cared enough to come home every night. You brought the paycheck with you. You tried. Right? I want you to think about your life and the things which never happened to you.

Think also of the accident of the timing of your birth... or the city in which you were born. What if you had been born a Jew in a Warsaw Ghetto in the nineteen thirties?

What if you had been visiting the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. What if you had been a sailor – say in Pearl Harbor, on December 7, 1941.

Another woman told me that the things that never happened of which she was the most proud were “The times I never gave up! I could have, but something made me hold on. Someone made me hold on.”

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What if you had been born with a horrible handicap at birth, or a gene had spiraled out of control? Or you had been abused in your home, or in the church... There are a myriad of possibilities.

Now I am aware of the large numbers of people within the sound of my voice, or who will later read my sermon, who have had a number of dreadful things happen in their lives. I want to be careful, careful I do not add to their worry or bring increased puzzlement to their lives. The most noble thing I know about the struggles of human existence is the magnificent way in which some people overcome their adversities. Glory be to God!

If you are one of those who has faced the worse and mastered it, I salute you. I will brag about you. I would sit at your feet and learn from you. An old friend of mine has often told me that if it were not for the dreadful years he was addicted to alcohol, and the fog he walked around in then, he would never have found the joy which he now knows. Sometimes the things which did happen, help you. I am aware that some people have walked through the darkness, or are walking though it now; they are my fellow travelers in the faith, and my heroes.

Well, let us look to the help from a couple of pros to dig a little deeper. W. H. Auden, a beautiful poet, once wrote about how critical is the first public event you can remember. Gather in your memory the first important national event that you can think of, international or local, wherever. The first headline you remember? What is it? The end of World War II? (That’s mine.) Someday a now five year old someone will say, “September 11, 2001.” The assassination of Kennedy? Pearl Harbor? The beginning of The Depression? The end of World War I? You probably cannot go back much further than that.... But think about it and what it says about you. Auden said, and I believe him, “There can be no doubt that your life is/was colored in a significant way by the first event you remember.” It works subconsciously on you forever. Think about it. If you want to argue, argue with Auden. I think it is a point worth pondering.

Or, what if your parents, because of a call to the mission field or in Government service, had moved you to Iran or Afghanistan ten years ago? What if the circumstances out of which the beauty of the life you now have and enjoy were all of a sudden denied to you in your formative years? What if you were born at a time when all 18 year old boys went off to war? Or when your family struggled through The Great Depression? Public events alter the time and chance of where you came to be, and what you can become, none of which you ever chose. They are important to the person you are: repeat, the things that never happened can come as blessings from above. That's Auden.

Others know it, too, of course. Sigmund Freud steps up next. Freud taught that long before the conscious attachment, or even the awareness of your abilities to form the values of your life come, those values are already planted there by the significant adult, or adults, who had control over you before you could control yourself. Now I know this is debatable, but let us say that by age seven (some say three) your ability to cope with life, and the categories with which you respond to what life will give you, were/are already imbedded in your soul and psyche. By the time you begin to reflect on your life situations and values, the equipment which you use to reflect on them is already in place. What you seek to unfathom is already determined. The shovel was given to you in secret, and you began to dig up the principles already placed inside your head by those who helped to formulate you.

I deal with a lot of people in trouble. It is a large part of my work. Invariably, if we take enough time to unearth it; if we go through the pain of what it means to roll back and back to find the roots of the trouble, I find it is usually related to what was there in the earliest years and all along the way. In that way I am a Freudian. The way in which you go about living of the stress and times of your life is already in place.

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“The things that never happened...” Some years ago, as another example, a young cousin/nephew of mine was killed in a car crash. He was in an auto accident on the way home from work one day. Driving a sensible 35 miles an hour or so, he pulled out around a slow moving car which was taking too much time. In the next instant, he was dead. Gone. I spent time at his funeral thinking about the day his Uncle Donald, whom he never had met, was also killed in a car accident thirty years before. I thought about the number of times that I had pulled out around cars that were making me impatient. I thought about all the times when I had driven too fast, or was too tired to drive at all. I thought about all the crazy, mixed-up things I have done over the course of my 66 years. When you think about it, in the time and providence of God, the things which never happened to you (or to the ones you love) count for more than those which did. We are lucky people, indeed, just to be alive.

One day, (I tried not to write this into the manuscript), one of the most dynamic and memorable moments of my life took place in downtown Pittsburgh. I was at the main Post Office. I should never have been parked where you are not supposed to park alongside the office. I had no right to be there but I thought it would take just a minute, so I parked my car. I jumped out, left the motor running, ran across the street, rushed into the post office, got my mail, turned around and raced outside.

I was in such a rush to get back in my car I forgot to look up the street. There, right before my eyes, was a huge construction truck going about as fast as a truck could ever go on a downtown street. Had it not been for the young girl across the street, who observed what was going on, and screamed loud enough for the truck driver and me both to hear her at the same time, I would have been dead. Me. Dick Cromie. Dead and gone. My companion that day was shocked. When I got home that night, and for many days to come, I could hear the screech of the brakes of a truck over and over again, a truck whose driver was driving too fast. But I could mainly hear the scream of the young woman I never got to thank for shouting: "Watch out!" The things that never happened. Thank God for them.

Well, it is time we got to our text in the 23rd Psalm, the Shepherd's Psalm. It is a shepherd's job to keep his eye on the sheep. But no shepherd can keep his eye on all the sheep all the time. Right? There are not enough hours or eyes for the shepherd to do that, not enough time and energy for him to be concerned about all the sheep every moment of every day. But, he knows where they are. They know his name. When he whistles, they know who is whistling. I've watched it happen. The lambs also know their mothers. Every dumb little lamb, even a day old, knows its own mother, as opposed to all the other ewes in the field. And, as you know, all ewes look alike. But a baby lamb never goes to the wrong mother ewe. And a sheep never responds to the whistle of another shepherd other than his own.

The shepherd takes care of the sheep, especially when they are in trouble. Most of the time there is no need to have a good shepherd looking after you. But when you need someone to come to lift you up and rescue you from trouble and hold you for a while; that's what the Psalmist is saying. A little lamb and a big sheep have a lot of freedom. They can roam through the pastures whenever they want. Occasionally things happen that even the best of shepherds cannot prevent. Life was not meant to be easy. But at the end of it all, when the shepherd knows that a particular sheep or lamb is in trouble, the good shepherd will be there.

When the Bible says in the same Psalm, “Goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life,” you can believe it. God’s goodness is always there. There are times, because of human sin, because of circumstances, because of plain and simple bad luck, when the need comes to the fore. The Bible says that God will help us to overcome it and to see its purpose. In the end it all fits together. The goodness of the Lord follows us every day of our lives. Even when it goes into the valley of the darkness, where we can not see because the cloud comes down and covers the valley. “Though I walk though the valley....” It does not mean literally “the valley of the shadow of death,” although that is true also. When that darkness covers it all over, the goodness you seek is hard to see. Sometimes you have to move out and trust that someone will be there to take your hand in the darkness. Maybe you are following a whistle. God’s goodness is always there. His hand is always out to touch you and to walk you home. Whether you and I recognize it or receive it, and understand it, is the only question in question.

We need to be careful before we go, with a little warning here: when you thank God for all the good things that have happened to you, or to use the topic of this sermon, when you recall the things which never happened to you, soon you could start walking around in what the Bible calls your pride: “Thank you God that none of these things happened to me.” They happened to all the other people, as if somehow in His favor they did not come to one on so high a level as you. Right: That’s a dangerous possibility.

Every time you thank God for the blessings of your family or our nation you have to remember the starving millions of Afghanistan. Did He love us so much that He blessed us, and not the rest of the world? Especially when the Bible says, His love for all his children is equal. The opposite danger for you and me, as believing Christian people, might be worse: not to believe that God’s favor is upon us all, particularly in the times of our trouble, or we will miss the essential story of what the whole Christian Gospel is all about.

As for me, the Lord and I have gotten along really well. Goodness and mercy have followed me almost all the days of my life. Out of my experience I have a rich appreciation for what it means to take things for granted and not to! And once more, the meaning of our little sermon together here, I thank God for all the things that never happened in my life.

Take a minute and then we will go, and think about the things in your life that qualify as those which never happened to you or to those you love, not now and not forevermore, we pray, Amen.

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