

VBC
Acts 20:24
December 19-20, 2009

“The Centering Message of Christmas”

He was on the Mike Douglas Show at the age of three (three!!!)
-demonstrating his uncanny ability to hit a golf ball off the tee and to putt from a distance

-in his days of youth, he memorized every major golf record with the aim of breaking each one

-his walls were covered with the pictures of golfing legends

-after winning tournaments, he'd immediately head out to a driving range to improve his already amazing game

-few have demonstrated the *single minded purpose* of a Tiger Woods—the exquisite discipline and absolute mental focus

-that have all worked to make him the richest athlete in the world—the competitor of the decade

But as his life has tragically demonstrated in recent weeks—

-*what does it profit a man to gain the world and lose his soul?*

-*what is gained by living life on your own terms—rather than God's terms?*

-some men give themselves to finding their lives—only to lose them

-but others lose their lives—and in the course of the loss—find them

If ever there was a man with single minded purpose—*the sort that counts*--who lived life on God's terms

-who lost his life to find it--it was Paul, the apostle

-an antagonist—who became the gospel's great protagonist

-who having completed three journeys—10,000 miles—to reach lost people

-was still on a mission—on his way to Jerusalem—possibly Rome

-but in Acts 20—he stopped long enough to give one of his greatest speeches

-challenging all who would hear to *rise to the purpose of your being*

-fulfill the reason for which you were made—using the race course as his metaphor-read 20:18-31

-as one can sense—it was one of Paul's most emotional speeches—for it went to the core of his being

-here we see him vulnerable, reflective, inspiring

-telling us what mattered most to him

-the men Paul spoke to mattered—they were elders from Ephesus

-men Paul had poured three years of his life into

-held nothing back in the task of teaching, equipping, preparing

-was never in it for the money

-and though the church at Ephesus had become the poster church of Asia—where the word flourished—19:20

-Paul warned here that there would be perilous days ahead

-the enemy would do all he could to disrupt the church—the culture would seep in through the pores of the congregation

-the wolves would sneak in through the doors

-the church would need to be guided by those who would rise to the full purpose of their being

-would they rise to it?

-every so often—God places a similar challenge before us

-will we rise to the full purpose of our being?

-follow wherever He leads—live on His terms?

-will we become the persons God created us to be?

-transcend the persons we are—even if it means taking us to the very edge of our faith?

-or will we live life on our terms for our purposes?

-these are what Ruth Haley Barton labels “fatal questions”—for they will cost

-in this text—Paul makes clear what such a life will require—

1-YIELD THE KEYS

Illus—by my senior year of HS, I owned my third car—an Austin Sprite

-it was pure class—and I loved driving it

-but one day my dad and I had a falling out—lines were drawn in the sand

-and dad demanded the keys

-it was his way of demonstrating authority—giving them to him was my way of preserving my life

-in the course of his life—Paul came to see that finding his course meant choosing to follow Jesus

-but it was more—*far more!*

-it was coming to grips with God's ownership—God's rights over him—handing over the keys

-Jesus did not merely meet Paul on the road to Damascus—He apprehended him

-set him on his feet and declared—THIS IS YOURS TO DO!

-rise to the full purpose of your being!

-and from that point on—Paul would use slave language to describe himself
-to the Corinthians he said—let a man consider us as under rowers of Christ, slaves in His galley—I Cor 4:1

- Paul used the same language here—describing himself as a man bound—a word often associated with chains
- the Spirit now determined his itinerary

- Paul's language reveals that he got something many of us miss
- that when God calls us to Himself—it is more than an invitation—it is a summons, an assignment
- it is an offer—it is also a demand—this is yours to do!
- have you heard the Spirit say this?

- salvation declares God has come to indwell us—but more—He has come to incarcerate us
- and until we get this—we will never find our course

- rising to our purpose involves something else—

2-DO THE MATH

- yielding to God's course is not easy—never promised to be
- while it's straight—and never crooked
- it's also narrow—and never wide

- in Paul's case-God made it clear that afflictions, imprisonment awaited him-vs 23

- it was there from the very start-Acts 9:16-"I will show him how much he must suffer for My sake"

- suffering was part of Paul's assignment-I Thess 3:5

- and to a certain extent—this is true for us
- all who desire to live godly lives will be persecuted
- mocked for holding to absolutes
- attacked by the adversary for bearing the name of Jesus

- none of us choose this

- given a choice—we prefer the sunshine to storms

- aspirin to pain/ cushions to concrete

- clear roads to dark alleys—the good life to the hard

- but God makes it clear—there is a cost

- so how does one willingly take this course—how did Paul?

- the opening words of vs 24 tell us-no one freely goes on it unless they have come to terms with the math

- Paul knew challenging days were ahead of him--but it didn't matter—he had calculated--"I count, consider—lit "make of myself" of no ultimate value

- the language is metaphoric--borrowed from business—he uses it to draw us in

- like us, Paul at one time was impressed with his self-worth
- self absorbed, impressed with his accomplishments-it all added up to a lot-Phil 3
- but Christ changed all of this—called him—and us—to do some subtraction, reducing
- Paul learned that life is not about him—but about God

- Gal 2:20-“I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me”

- Phil 3:10-“I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ”

- what once were his trophies, achievements, accomplishments—amounted to so much landfill, garbage for the dogs

- and this* enabled Paul to willingly go to Jerusalem—and ultimately Rome

- for he knew that subtraction leads to multiplication—

- his suffering was what revealed God’s strength-2 Cor 12

- testified to the authenticity of his message-I Cor 4

- made abundantly clear to Paul and others where his treasure was

- all of us in Christ must do the math

- we are dead men on furlough—freed from self-sufficiency, self pity self absorption, self-exaltation, self indulgence-able to be His instruments

- but rising to the purpose of one’s full being demands something more—everything up to now was prelude

3-STAY THE COURSE

Illus-STP-Centralia seemed a good end—what do I need to prove?

- I already know I’m young-vigorous

- one thing is clear in this text—Paul wasn’t about to waste his life

- wasn’t about to drift through life—stop short in Caesarea, Centralia

- God’s call to go the full course was so tightly woven into the fabric of his being, so core to who he was, that to ignore it, refuse it, *stop short* of would have been to jeopardize his wellbeing

- plunge life into meaninglessness

- so he declared—“Bound by the Spirit, I make of myself of no account so I can finish, end my course”

- Paul is back to metaphor—inviting us to run as well

- he used similar language in Phil 3:12-I press on to lay hold of what God laid hold of me”

- everything will bend to this—relationships, position, possessions

- each of us has an assigned lane, a particular course to finish

-we don't need to know where it is going—Paul did not-vs 22
-but we need to know what it is about—and Paul got it-vs 24

-what drove him—the purpose for which he was made—the person he was born to be—the course he was called to follow—WAS TO BEAR WITNESS TO GOD'S GRACE

-for grace was everything to Paul—
-as far as sinful men go—in Paul's estimation—he was the worst of the worst-I Tim 1:15

-but God made Paul's sinful table the site of his salvation feast
-demonstrated that no matter who we are—no matter what our failures
-we are all ultimately redeemable

-illus-Willimon

I believe God is something like this—Paul found God to be like that
-God's persistent grace knocked down Paul's self-righteous door
-and from then on—Paul determined it would be his defining message

CONC

Barton-Every leader leads through their story

-behind the success of Starbucks is its founder Howard Schultz
-and behind Howard Schultz is the story of his father
-who was not cared for in the workplace—was crushed by the system—did not find fulfillment and dignity'
-so Schultz channeled all of his energy in creating the kind of workplace his dad would have been proud to work in

-behind all of us is a defining story
-for Paul—it was grace
-if we identify with Paul—isn't it ultimately the same answer—grace
-for grace is our story—it's really the story of Christmas
-and must be our mission