** FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS**

 **“Don’t Look Back. You Are Not Going That Way”**

 **Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 43:16-21, Matthew 3:13-17**

***This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, January 8,2023***

 ***at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.***

**Matthew 3:13-17**

## The Baptism of Jesus

## Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.’ Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’

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On May 6, 1954, Roger Bannister became the first man in history to run a mile in less than four minutes. Within two months, John Landry eclipsed the record by 1.4 seconds. On August 7 of that same year, the two met together for a historic race.

As they moved into the last lap, Landry held the lead. It looked as if he had one, but as he neared the finish line, Landry was haunted by the question, “Where is Bannister?”

As he turned to look, Bannister took the lead. Landry later told a Time Magazine reporter, “If I hadn’t looked back, I would’ve won!” (Our Daily Bread, August, 1995).

It is so easy to look back, isn’t it? To check and see where something is in our past…to see if it is catching up to us.

And I may not be, “Where is Banister?” It may be, “Where is that big mistake, the one that always seems to loom so large?” Or, “Where are those personal failures, those human frailties from which I have so desperately tried to distance myself?

Of course, it’s not simply the negative aspects of our past that we try to outpace. To be certain, there any number of good things that cause us to miss out on what lies ahead…successes that cause us to become content and rest on our laurels.

It has been said that, when the army of Alexander the Great was advancing on Persia, at one critical point it appeared that his troops might be defeated. Apparently, the soldiers had taken on so much plunder from the previous campaigns, they had become weighted down and were losing their effectiveness in combat.

Upon realizing this, Alexander the Great command that all the spoils be thrown into a hip and burned. The men, as we might expect, complained bitterly, but they soon came to see the wisdom of the order. Someone once wrote, “It was as if wings have been given to them. They walked lightly again”

Martha Ann told me about a bumper sticker she saw…it read: “Don’t look back. You aren’t going that way.” That’s true, you know, and when we do look back - and we do it all the time - we inevitably run the risk of the past overtaking taking us.

And it’s not that we shouldn’t take stock in the past; indeed, that would be the very definition of foolishness…if we didn’t take to heart certain lessons learned, which is to say nothing of all the people and places, and things that have contributed to who we are today.

So, please don’t misunderstand what I’m trying to say…the past is important, but while it can be informative, even instructive, it is, in the end, the past, and every moment that we spend living there, is a moment that we do not spend living here. It is a moment that is spent looking somewhere other than ahead and toward that proverbial finish line.

The apostle Paul was no stranger to the metaphor of a race, and he looked ahead to that time in each of our lives, when we would finish our race, and one way he suggested that we could be successful in finishing our race, was by looking ahead rather than looking behind.

“But this one thing I do:” Paul said, “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus...” (Philippians 3:13-16).

And this was coming from a man who had every good reason to reflect upon his past. After all, he had been a great persecutor of Christians. I mean, who knows how many of God’s children lost their lives at his hands!

When Ananias heard that he had been chosen by God to help restore Paul’s site after Paul had been blinded on the road to Damascus, Ananias said: “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has the authority from the chief priests to bind up all who invoke your name.”

But the Lord said, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before the Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.”

It was as if God were saying, Ananias, everything you know about Paul has to do with the past, what I am talking about is the future!

In our OT Lesson this morning, Isaiah begins with a few poignant references to the Exodus — that singularly redemptive work of God, in the life of His people, when he led them out of bondage / out of Egypt. And when Isaiah talks about the Lord who “makes a way in the sea, path of the mighty waters,” he is undoubtedly recalling God’s faithfulness!

But in verse 18, Isaiah says something that catches our attention. He says, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.”

Now, considering that Isaiah had just done the very thing that he seems to be cautioning us against, we are left to presume that there must be a deeper level of meaning behind what Isaiah was saying, and we begin to see it, I believe, in Isaiah’s intentionality about looking ahead.

Yes, what God has done in the past is extraordinary…Isaiah himself recounted how “chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick.”

There is no doubt that what our liberating God did to save His people from the hand of Pharaoh was amazing; ah, but what God was going to do was even more amazing!

…First, by lifting his own hand against the Chaldeans, and ultimately, in the pierced hands of his suffering servant about whom Isaiah will later say “shall be exalted a lift it up”…oh, Isaiah wants us to know that is what we need to be talking about; that is what we need to be looking for; because so new and so profound will be God’s work in the lives of His children, that everything before it will simply pale in comparison.

In much the same way, when John the Baptizer came on the scene, no one would’ve ever suggested that he failed to understand the past.

To be certain, John knew full well of God’s previous and mighty acts of faithfulness; he knew about God’s prophets. Why, he was a prophet himself! But John also understood something of the vital importance of looking ahead.

“The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down, and under tie the song of his sandals. I have baptized with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

That is what we affirm whenever someone is baptized…we are affirming that they are a child of God, and that God will continue to be at work in their life…that they will continue, by God’s grace, to grow in wisdom, and in favor, and into the fullness that God intends.

In so many ways, we are talking about what God is going to do / that future of which we are a part…but part of what we need to do is to focus on it…we need to live into it, and one of the ways we do this is by choosing to look ahead…and anticipating…and actually being part of that which God has yet to do.

Still, the temptation remains for us to look back…and, sadly, sometimes, for having done so, we miss out on something of the future that God intends.

There really is something to be said for that faithful soul who sits on the edge of their seat, and who knows in their hearts that “The days are surely coming,” says the Lord / that faithful disciple of Jesus who knows in their heart that “the eye has not seen, nor the ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love Him.”

Consider again how Isaiah talks about that kind of forward-looking faith…he says “Do not remember the former things, or consider the themes of old.”

It’s interesting how Isaiah talks about our remembering the past…he talks about it as if it were a conscious decision, as if we could choose to remember something or not.

Have you ever thought about that? That to a great extent, we have the ability to choose to forget or choose to remember for that matter….

That should be good news for all of us, because it means that there are some things that we can actually leave in the past, and, here again, this doesn’t mean that the past didn’t happen / it doesn’t mean that certain things of the past do not have some measure of influence over us today. No! What it does mean though is that we can choose to look somewhere other than the past for that which would define who we are!

You know, maybe, that is our first and best step…to simply not look back / to determine not to honor — even with a casual glance — any part of our life which does not serve to enhance our life…to just leave it behind!

What is it about our life that we might choose to forget? What about us needs to be left in the past and never looked at again? Is it an inability to forgive? Are the actions of a person who has done us harm? Perhaps that person is ourselves! Are the things that we have done or left undone that seem to be hot on our trail…always influencing us…always right there…right behind us!

“Don’t look back. You aren’t going that way!” No! Our way has been determined by Jesus Christ our Lord, and about that way Paul has told us that “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

That is the future which awaits us as the Children of God, and that, dear friends, is the Gospel!

Let us pray…Lord, help us to not be distracted by those things which would serve to take our eyes off of you; instead, help us to let go of those things, particularly those things in our past, which would infringe upon our ability to live into your future. This we ask in Jesus’ name. Amen.

\*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt, please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.