FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

"AUTUMN'S ADMONITION"

Scripture Lesson: 2 Timothy 4: 9-22

This sermon was preached by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, October 11, 2026 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

2 Timothy 4: 9-22

Personal Instructions

9 *Do your best to come to me soon,* 10 *for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia.* 11 *Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me in ministry.* 12 *I have sent Tychicus to Ephesus.* 13 *When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments.* 14 *Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will pay him back for his deeds.* 15 *You also must beware of him, for he strongly opposed our message.*

16 *At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them!* 17 *But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth.* 18 *The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.*

Final Greetings and Benediction

19 *Greet Prisca and Aquila and the household of Onesiphorus.* 20 *Erastus remained in Corinth; Trophimus I left ill in Miletus.* 21 *Do your best to come before winter. Eubulus sends greetings to you, as do Pudens and Linus and Claudia and all the brothers and sisters.*

22 *The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you.*

Autumn's Admonition

Leader: The word of the Lord.
People: Thanks be to God.

There is something to be said for every season of the year no doubt, but as most of you know, for me, autumn is the season without rival. I love everything about it. I love its crisp coolness. I love the autumn sky, which always seems the bluest, and the autumn clouds that stir the imagination and make possible the glorious risings and settings of the sun, almost on a daily basis. Nathaniel Hawthorn was speaking for me when he wrote:

> "There is no season when such pleasant and sunny spots may be lighted on, and produce so pleasant an effect on the feelings, as now in October."

Without question some of my fondest memories from earlier days are inseparably linked to this time of year – the smell of freshly raked leaves burning; the excitement at the beginning of each football season and the recurring conviction that this will be the year that my team finally makes it; trips to the Mississippi State Fair in October every year as a child, and the taste of freshly pulled taffy; hot bowls of chili on Saturday night; sleeping under blankets with the windows open; bonfires and pep rallies; the harvest moon; frost on the ground and smoke in the chimneys; hayrides in the country, when it was so cold that your date had to snuggle close and yet so dark that she could not see you blush.

I love the fall colors too – hues of red, yellow and orange are so spectacular they take one's breath. Trees and bushes appear to be on fire, and somewhere on every street is a scene befitting a postcard. One of the most delightful things this Mississippi flatlander discovered in moving to the mountains of East Tennessee is just how spectacular Mother Nature can be with all of her autumn finery on.

Autumn here in the Lowcountry is dramatically different but equally lovely in its own way. Frankly, I have had to learn to appreciate, and now even to anticipate how the marsh grasses take on a golden hue and especially how the sweet grass, which takes on a cranberry cast come the fall. Every October countless numbers of Monarch butterflies pay us a visit on their migration to southern climates. It is not so much the foliage in Charleston as it is the flowering plants and shrubs which arrive to enhance the season's beauty – the lantana, the oleander, the goldenrod, the red salicornia that causes the marsh to blush red in the fall, and which attract pigmy blue butterflies smaller than a fingernail. And flower boxes in the windows of homes are even more brilliant as fall arrives in Charleston. Every autumn I start looking for the blooms on the cassia trees. Very soon now they will be graced with brilliant yellow flowers, which seem to defy the cold and the darkness of an approaching winter.

To our surprise we have discovered that nothing can quite compare with living at the beach in the autumn. The tourists may come in the summer, but God goes to the beach in October! Walking on the beach in the fall, early morning or evening late, one almost has the beach to oneself. And what is so phenomenal to me in autumn is how the stars form a canopy over you, and because of their clarity and brilliance you can almost reach up and touch them. Never is the night sky more beautiful than in the coolness and clarity of autumn.

The fall fashions appeal to me more than any of the others as well – camel hair and corduroy, flannel shirts and blue jeans, turtlenecks, wool sweaters, tweed suits. Yes, autumn is a wonderful time of the year, and for my money it's the best.

And yet, there is another side to autumn's tale. The season has bout it something of a sad and melancholy tone. Oh, at first you might dismiss the thought, but deep within, you know that if autumn is here, winter cannot be far behind. Autumn, you see, is a parable of all that fades. The oranges and yellows of October will soon give way to the grays and browns and blacks of November. As we look upon God's created order, we see constant reminders that just as there is a season of birth and growth and fruitful production, so too in the providence of God is there a time for decay and death.

We can see this truth in the fabric of nature and we can hear it too in the melancholy music of nature in autumn. Hal Borland in his *Book of Days* describes one such sound of autumn, the clamor of migrating geese. Listen to his provocative description:

> "Most birds migrate in silence, but not the geese. Whether you are walking down a city street, standing in a suburban backyard or working in a rural wood lot, you know when

the geese fly over. First you hear that distant gabble, a faint clamor that seems to echo from the whole sky. You search the sky, and the gabble comes closer. Then you see them, flying high, making a V almost like a pencil line of dots.

You listen and watch, and the flight is so high it seems almost leisurely. If it is a close V in formation, it is almost certainly Canada geese. If it is a looser V, rippling and waving, or if it is a long line like one leg of the V, it more likely is the less common snow geese. Whichever, the flock's gabbling is like the voice of restless autumn, and the flight never wavers. On and on, over the hills and towns and the cities, to the far horizon, and still beyond, southward. Until only that restless echo, faint and haunting remains.

They are footloose as the autumn wind, and they follow the sun. There is something both exhilarating and faintly sad in the echo of their going. Maybe it is the echo of another summer gone. Maybe it is the freedom song of the skies. Whatever, it haunts the earthbound heart."

It seems I hear the geese less frequently than when we first arrived in the Lowcountry in 1997. Whether that is due to fewer geese along the Coastal Flyway or diminished hearing by the listener, either could well be a sign of the times. Yet, I miss that distant gabble. But, there are other sounds of autumn here in the Lowcountry – the plaintive croak of a tree frog following an autumn downpour, the lonely cry of a marsh hen, or the crows clamoring in the hackberry tree outside our window early in the morning as they fight over the fall berries.

And so it is that if we closely observe and if we carefully listen, we may just see or hear autumn's subtle admonition reminding us that there is a beginning and an end for all things – for the year, for each of us and our loved ones, and as I wish to emphasize once again this morning, for the opportunities of service and growth that are before us right now.

The text for today's message is 2 Timothy 4: 21 where the Apostle Paul, now old and tired and soon to die, writes to his young associate, Timothy, whom he dearly loves, and asks him to please come and visit. He says to him, almost as an aside as he draws his letter to a close, "Come before winter." Why the urgency of this appeal?

To begin with, we need to realize that at this point in his life, Paul is residing in a Roman prison cell awaiting imminent word as to either his execution or his release. Most of his friends have deserted him; he's far from home and family; his health is failing; he knows the end is approaching. In his loneliness and isolation, he wants more than anything else to see again his young friend, Timothy. He asks in verse 13 that Timothy bring with him young Mark, who can assist him in his ministry, and also to bring a favorite cloak and the books and parchments Paul loved so much to read and to hold. He then urges him to "come before winter!"

Why the hurry? You see, what Paul and Timothy both must have realized was that in those days the season for navigation in the Mediterranean Sea closed in the autumn and would not open again until the spring. So it was now or never for Timothy. Either he left immediately for the trip to Rome or he forgot this mission of mercy. In all probability by the following Spring Paul would be dead. So this text and this situation remind us

that there may be things we can do right now, opportunities we can seize, challenges we can accept, missions of mercy we can perform, and words of kindness we can speak, which may never come our way again.

"Do your best to come before winter." One of the most powerful and persuasive sermons of this past century was preached on this text by Dr. Clarence E. McCartney. The sermon was so popular among his parishioners, first at the Arch Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia and later at the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburg, that Dr. McCartney repeated the sermon every October for 40 years. Countless lives were changed and influenced through that one sermon alone, and it seemed to have had a particular appeal for the numerous medical students who frequented the services of the church in Pittsburg. The sermon itself occupies a place of prominence in the history of the American pulpit, and rightly so. (I had heard about his sermon long before I ever actually heard it on tape just a few years ago from Reigner Recording Library at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia.) But ever since I first learned of the sermon and its provocative text, its solemn warning has nudged at my heart each and every autumn. I recall Paul's haunting plea, "Do your best to come before winter."

Now I have no desire to be morbid here, yet I know that some autumn will be my last to read this passage, or to preach it, or to heed its warning. And some autumn will be your last as well. It matters little whether you are young or old, sick or healthy, ready or not. Some autumn, we know not when, will be the last for each of us. That being the case, opportunities may be before us in the present moment that will never return. Therefore, this morning I would like to use this text once again as a way of inviting each and every one of us to respond right now to the call of God in three specific dimensions of our lives.

"Come before winter." To begin with, I would use this text to urge us to come to our senses about what is important in life and what is not. It seems to me that most of us, and I certainly include myself here, invest the greater part of our time, a disproportionate amount of our energy, and inordinate amount of our money in enterprises that are trivial, temporary, or else narrowly self-serving. "Trivial Pursuit" is more that a popular parlor game. It is an apt description of the lives of far too many people. We waste so much of our living and our resources in empty enterprises by allowing Madison Avenue, Wall Street, the media, and our peers to tell us what makes for satisfaction and wholeness and happiness in life. Had we only listened to the voice of God in scripture; had we only heeded the testimony of those who have gone this way before us, we would have known that there is no lasting joy, nor any ultimate fulfillment in the selfish accumulation of things, in the relentless pursuit of personal honors, in the practice of indiscriminate sexuality, in the preoccupation with external stimulants, in the cruel search for power, or in the maniacal quest for fame.

How tragic it is when men and women live most of their lives with mistaken and futile notions as to what makes for genuine greatness and what issues in true happiness. And thus I urge you, before winter arrives, come to your senses about what is truly important in life and give yourself unashamedly and unreservedly to that.

You see, the simple truth is that today it might be possible for us to change our ways and come to our senses, but next year, or even next week, it might be impossible. I know I should qualify that. It may not be impossible, for with God nothing is really impossible, but history and experience verify that it is highly improbable. Sometimes our morals and values become so ingrained, our habits so entrenched, and our character so warped through years of abuse and neglect that even God Almighty finds it difficult to get through to us.

"Come before winter." I would use this text in a second sense this morning to urge us while we still have the opportunity and the inclination to accept the obligations that love places upon us with respect to others, especially our friends and loved ones. The winter will come and go and next spring the earth will be decked, not only with a new crop of flowers, but with the graves of some of our present opportunities. There are deeds of love you have longed to perform and words of affection and friendship you have longed to speak, but you have hesitated, thinking perhaps that a more convenient time would come along later, or that perhaps next year your life would not be so hectic, or circumstances would be different. But next year will never arrive for some of us here today.

For some of us here today this autumn will be our best, if not our last chance to respond to the promptings of love, to say and do those things for people we love which we have put off saving and doing for too long. And so in a second sense I urge you, "Come before winter" to those responsibilities of love you have toward the significant people in your life.

Now of course, it is important to come to your senses about life's priorities, and it is also important that you come to those opportunities for loving and faithful service while you can. But thirdly, and preeminently, I would urge each of us to "come before winter" to our God. This could well be the autumn of our lives as well as the autumn of our faith. We cannot know for sure, of course, but not a single person has been promised tomorrow.

What I am saying here this morning applies to everyone, but I want our young people to pay special and close attention. Sometimes when we are young, and sometimes even when we get older, we are tempted to think that we can have our fling and do our own thing now and get right with God and others later on. Coming to God in repentance and faith, seeking God's forgiveness, committing our life and energies and resources to God's purposes is important for sure, but we tend to think that we can do this at any time, right? Wrong! History and experience reveal that while God's summons is always there, our capacity to respond may not be.

We are all creatures of habit, and we easily become imprisoned by our own attitudes and outlooks. If we fail to respond to God's urging when we feel it, then the next time God tugs at our hearts they may have grown cold.

For some of us here today, it is now or never when it comes to life altering decisions that have eternal significance. The next time God calls, our ears may have grown deaf. The next time God demonstrates his love or his power or his compassion, our vision may have grown too dim to see. None of us is guaranteed that we will have the opportunity to come to God at some point down the road. All we have is the present moment. "Behold, now is the acceptable time. This is the day of salvation!" writes Paul to the Corinthians. His words are as valid for our day as they were for his own.

It is so important that we give our lives to Jesus Christ while we are young and that we discipline ourselves in our youth now to take the Christian faith and the Christian church seriously. If these rafters could talk, if these pews could share their secrets, they would tell you the story of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people who missed the kingdom of God simply because when God called, they said "tomorrow," and tomorrow simply never came.

William Barclay, in his book *And Jesus Said: A Handbook on the Parables of Jesus*, tells the story of three apprentice devils, coming from hell to earth for their first assignment, and explaining their proposed strategy to Satan:

"One said, 'I will tell (humans) that there is no God.' 'That,' said Satan, 'will not do because in their heart of hearts they know there is.'

'I will tell (humans),' said the second, 'that there is no hell.' 'That," said Satan, 'is still more hopeless for even in life they have experienced the remorse of hell.'

'I will tell them,' said the third, 'that there is no hurry.'

'Go,' said Satan, 'tell them that and you will ruin them by the millions.'"

Dwight L. Moody, the famous evangelist of an earlier day, returned from a meeting and reported to the family hosting him, "two and one-half" conversations. "I suppose you mean two adults and one child," his host said. "Why, no. I mean two children and one adult. You see, children can give their whole lives, the adult has only half a life to give."

Maybe that is why the preacher of Ecclesiastes says: "So remember your Creator while you are still young, before those dismal days and years come when you will say, 'I don't enjoy life.'" (Eccle. 12:1) Today you can come to your God, any of you, for this is the autumn of faith. But winter will be here before you know it.

And so, in conclusion, before winter comes, I appeal to you come to your senses about the important things in life; come to those responsibilities and privileges that love is placing before you; and most importantly, come to your God. Don't leave this sanctuary today with unresolved issues still on the table. You know what God is calling you to do and to be. Our problem is not our knowledge, it is rather our will.

Thus, I challenge you to make the resolution to do those things that dare not be put off any longer. Now is the time to commit yourself fully to Jesus Christ, to his church, to your family, and to the kind of life that God calls each of us to live and will gladly equip us to live.

Clarence McCartney preached his famous sermon "Come Before Winter" for the fortieth and last time in 1955. I would like to close now by quoting the oft-repeated conclusion of that timely message:

"Once again, then I repeat these words of the Apostle, 'Come before winter'; and as I pronounce them, common sense, experience, conscience, Scripture, the Holy Spirit, the souls of just men made perfect, and the Lord Jesus Christ will repeat with me, 'Come before winter!' Come before the haze of Indian summer has faded from the fields! Come before the snow lies on the uplands and the meadow brook is turned to ice! Come before life is over and your probation is ended, and you stand before God to give an account of the use you made of the opportunities, which in His grace He has granted you! Come before winter!

'Come to thy God in time, Youth, manhood, old age past; Come to the God at last.'"