Book 9

Sunday January 20, 1980

ANNUAL REPORT SERMON

28-32

"Betting on the Tortoise" Psalm 90:1-4, Luke 14:28-35

Most of us are familiar with the story of the tortoise and the hare. As I remember the story, the hare makes a bet with the tortoise that he can win over the tortoise in a race. Most of those on the sidelines who witness the wager are inclined to bet on the hare. They know of his quickness and speed. The race is on! The hare makes a fast start and the tortoise is soon left far behind. However the tortoise seems to know the habits of the hare, and is not fooled by the quick start. The tortoise hits his stride and keeps a steady pace. The hare, on the other hand, jumps so far in the lead that he becomes over-confident and begins to be pre-occupied with side attractions. He loses his concentration and gets involved in other activities. After all, he reasons, so what if I get far behind, I can always catch up.

As the day wears on, the tortoise continues his steady pace. He keeps his mind on the goal he wants to attain--to cross the finish line. As the race nears the end, the hare realizes that he is now far behind and so he puts on a final burst of speed, but the tortoise crosses the finish line first and wins the race.

This is the kind of story that could've been told by Jesus Christ as one of his parables. I tell it now because it's a story that needs to be heard again in our time, for we live in the kind of world where most people bet on the hare. He's a much more spectacular character. Most of us are impressed by one who makes a sensational beginning. It gets our attention. Furthermore we live in a world of the "quick fix," where the emphasis is on instanst change, speedy success, immediate gain!

Ours is a world of instant breakfast, fast diets, instant coffee and instant tea, fast-food restaurants, quick love affairs, learn to play the piano in ten easy lessons, dial-a-prayer, sudden wisdom and rapid knowledge.

Now this is not a polemic against all things speedy and in favor of all things slow. But it is to remind us that our Christian faith says there are times when we need to pay attention to the tortoise way of doing things

rather than always betting on the hare. A slow start is not always bad, nor is a fast start always good. Furthermore, regular and steady progress is many times to be preferred over quick starts, many stops and spurts.

1. So betting on the tortoise reminds us first of all that some things take time. In fact, many of the best things in life require slow and steady growth. This is particularly true in our spiritual dimension. Deepening one's spiritual life takes time. There's no way one can learn to pray or meditate in five easy lessons, or even ten, or twenty, or thirty. It takes slow, steady growth to develop the life of the spirit. Even those who have a kind of instant "born again" experience in their lives discover that a long process of growth in the faith is necessary. It's what the church has traditionally called sanctification.

But too many people bet on the hare. They will try worship for several weeks and then give up, forgetting that the spiritual giants throughout history spent years and years in a regular discipline in order to deepen the life of the spirit.

In a similar way of course, one cannot build a strong physical body in five, ten, or 20 days of exercise. It takes a daily discipline of keeping at it over a much longer period of time. And one cannot grow from a child into an adult in a short time.

It's the same in most areas of life. Rarely does a star college quarterback become an instant success in professional football. Developing a keen eye, gaining mature judgment, a sense of timing--all this and more takes lots of time and practice. It's betting on the tortoise instead of the hare.

The world is full of quick starters like the hare, but lacks those who like the tortoise keep a steady pace and finish the race. All of this is to say that the qualities which make a good start possible are not the same as the qualities that enable one to see something through to the end. Starting power and staying power are not the same thing in any area of life. The hare made an impressive beginning, but a poor ending. The tortoise, on the other hand, had an unimpressive beginning but a magnificent race and ending.

The landscape of religion is filled with spiritual drop-outs who made a fine beginning or wanted a quick fix, but lacked the staying power to keep at it and keep growing and deepening and maturing in the Christian faith.

Jesus Christ knew about this tendency. Many were the people who were impressed by him and vowed to be followers--they had lots of good starting power. But Jesus reminded them that it took a lot more than that. He said, "For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.'" Jesus would've bet on the tortoise rather than the hare.

The history of the Christian church through the centuries is more akin to the tortoise than the hare. The church had a slow beginning--twelve followers gathered around an itinerant preacher, who died on a cross. After the resurrection, the church grew slowly. It was not an instant over-night success, yet in its nearly 2000 years of history, it's had a very positive effect on the history of the world and has been a power in millions of individual lives.

2. Not only do some of the best things in life take time to develop and mature, but note secondly, that fast starts, impressive beginnings, can many times fool us. The fast start of the hare certainly deceived him and others. He thought he had it made because of his sensational beginning. He was sure he had won the race.

Elijah in the Old Testament had somewhat the same experience. His nation Israel was in trouble and Elijah was the appointed prophet of God. He knew what the trouble was--the people were worshipping a false god known as Baal. What's the solution? Get rid of the false religion! So Elijah set up a sensational contest between himself and the prophets of Baal. He built two large altars and piled wood on each of them. "Whoever can call down fire and ignite the wood, he is the prophet of the true God," Elijah said. The prophets of Baal called on their god, hour after hour, but no fire. When they had given up, Elijah began to call on the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and lightening struck and fire consumed the wood on his altar. Then Elijah killed all the prophets of Baal. An impressive beginning. But that wasn't the end of it. Queen Jezebel

and King Ahab chased Elijah out of the land and he ran for his life. He was ready to give up and went to hide in a cave.

In Felix Mendelssohn's oratorio, "Elijah," the story is set to music and one of the most moving parts of the whole composition is at this point. Elijah is discouraged, depressed and wants to die. Then Mendelssohn gives the contralto one of the most beautiful and inspiring songs. She sings, "O rest in the Lord, wait patiently for him."

Elijah learns the lesson we all need to learn. Rest in the Lord, wait patiently for him. There are times in our lives when the quick start, the impressive beginning is not enough--patient waiting and rest in the Lord are required. Fast starts, instant success, can deceive us. or early victories

Life is more than speedy or sensational beginnings--it's the follow through that counts, the waiting on the Lord.

3. Note thirdly, that like the tortoise in story, and as Jesus Christ repeatedly pointed out, however beautiful one's start, nothing matters much in human life without a good ending. And by a good ending, Jesus did not mean that the ending is always an outwardly successful and fortunate conclusion, as in old sentimental novels, where everything had to come out all right. There are other endings which though not always successful in the usual sense, are good endings non the less.

Some years ago, I attended a track meet at a local high school. One of the highlights of the afternoon was the two mile race. Eight contestants entered the race. Two dropped out after completing about a mile and a half. One of the remaining runners fell far behind. After a while he was so far behind that a few of the leaders in the race passed him. In other words, he got more than a full lap behind. The race ended, but this young man kept on running. The crowd at first began to feel sorry for him, but he kept on running. After a while, the mood of the crowd changed and everyone had his or her eye on this runner. When he finally finished the full two miles and crossed the finish line, the crowd stood and applauded. It was a different kind of good ending. He hadn't won the race, but he had kept the faith.

What is the ultimate tragedy in life? To face suffering, to be severely handicapped? Surely not! We've all known people in such situations who came through it splendidly and with magnificent staying power. But there is another kind of tragedy which is quite apalling and we've all witnessed it--a person fortunately born, blessed with a good home, excellent opportunities, a wealth of talent, then rising to a responsible position, loved and trusted and then not able in the crucial moment to follow through. Friends are betrayed, others are deceived, and the fine beginning comes to a tragic ending.

What is it that gives some people this amazing staying pwer to see things through, no matter what the beginning?

It's what Elijah discovered and others like him throughout history. "Rest in the Lord, wait patiently for him." Or as Isaiah the prophet put it, "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. God does not faint or grow weary. God's understanding is unsearchable. God gives power to the faint and to the one who has no might. God increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men and women shall fall exhausted; but they who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."

A vital and alive faith in God gives a strength and a staying power to one's life that can be gotten in no other way. It gives a person wide horizons, an eternal dimension, a long outlook, so that when one loses heart over the disappointment of some immediate expectation, one still knows that in the long run, God is faithful. Then we know as did the writer of the Psalm -- "Lord, thou has been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God."

It's this kind of faith that can give us hope in our personal lives and give us hope too as we look at the work of this local congregation as it is part of the total church of Jesus Christ throughout the ages.

Our growth and progress in First-Plymouth over the years has been more like the tortoise than the hare. It's been slow, steady growth in numbers and in depth, and I take heart from this as I hope you do.

Further my hope is that we will continue to be faithful as a people of God and like the runner in the two mile race continue in our task even though we may not be first over the finish line.

I'm betting on the tortoise, there's too much money on the hare. I ask you to join with the staff and other members of the congregation in continuing our journey together and in continuing your own personal spiritual journey. Be regular at worship, deepen and grow in the faith and carry out your ministry in your own vocation whatever that may be. Amen.