

"Encouragement"

Philippians 2:1-13 & Matthew 21:23-32

September 28, 2008

*Oh, give me a home where the buffalo roam
Where the deer and the antelope play
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word
And the skies are not cloudy all day
Home, home on the range
Where the deer and the antelope play
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word
And the skies are not cloudy all day*

Can you imagine living in a place and time where you can sit under the open night sky and sing "Home on the Range" around the campfire - smoke rising lazily from the fire as you lean back against the bed roll and think about the peaceful day - perhaps with a soft 'yippie-i-oh-kia' rising from your lips as the full moon beams down upon you. Doesn't it sound wonderful to be home on the range where seldom is heard a discouraging word ?

Part of the reason that it sounds appealing is that we hear so many discouraging words these days. I listened to President Bush this past week as he spoke about the economic crisis that we have been experiencing. I don't know when I have ever heard such a forecast of doom and gloom. The longer I listened, the more I felt as though the world was spinning out of control and we were all doomed. From national and international news, to politics and Wall street, to community and personal issues it seems as though we are being inundated with discouraging words.

And really - that is not the worst of it. I don't know if you have heard of the giant centrifuge that has been built in Switzerland. I had heard about it before but this week I read a little more about it. The premise is that they want to try to recreate the 'Big Bang' that scientists talk about as the beginning of all things. The centrifuge is something like an 18 miles circle that they must cool to 450 degrees below zero and then somehow smash atoms into each other at such speeds that it will recreate the 'Big Bang'. Exciting, huh? Well, what I read was that some scientists are concerned that if the project were to be successful, it could create a 'black hole' which would suck all of space and all life as we know it bringing about the end of all creation - at least in any dimension that would be recognizable to us. So what's a little financial crisis. - - - - Oh, for a little home on the range!

And then we listen to God's word. It seems almost surreal in its talk of encouragement, compassion, sympathy and love. I don't even know if we are able to really hear this word of encouragement in the midst of all our discouraging words. In the midst of all of the discouraging words it is easy to turn our concern in on ourselves all the more. Listen again

"If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,"

Is there any encouragement in Christ? The Apostle Paul assumes that there is. I know that there is! In fact, it is amazing to me that in our world of discouraging words people aren't flocking in droves to the church to receive even a tiny glimmer of the encouragement that life in Christ can bring to our world.

There is a very touching little story told of a poor woman with two children who had not had a bed for them to lie upon and scarcely any clothes to cover them. In the depth of winter, they were nearly frozen, and the mother took the door of a cellar off the hinges and set it up before the corner where they crouched down to sleep so that some of the draft and cold might be kept from them. One of the children whispered to the mother when she complained of how bad off they were, "Mother, what do those little children do who have a cellar door to put up in front of them?" How is it that a freezing child can possibly even think of children who might be less fortunate let alone express concern for their suffering?

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul goes to great lengths to describe the humility and compassion of Christ and invites us to have the same mind as Christ about the world and those with whom we share this life. Words like 'selfish ambition' and 'conceit' catch our attention - we know that we do not want those words associate with anyone's description of who we are. But heeding the call to 'humility' and 'concern for the interests of others over our own' are difficult to muster - especially in times when we hear so many discouraging words. Still, those are the descriptions that fit the life of Christ - those are the lifestyles that Paul suggests will lead to encouragement in the midst of a world of discouragement.

'Humility' and 'concern for the interests of others over our own' - what an incredible concept. I have listened intently to the news reports over the last couple of weeks in hopes of coming to understand what this financial crisis is about. Everything seemed to be rolling along like normal. How could

those huge financial institutions collapse? I finally think I began to get bit of an understanding the other day when one 'expert' talked about all of us being involved. We have simply wanted too much - we have bought too many things that we could not afford and the financial institutions have been too willing to lend us money that we could not pay back until finally too many loans could not be repaid. I suspect that is really simplistic but it seems to suggest that the crisis, once again comes back to our own sinful desire to fulfill all of our desires and not worry about anyone else.

It can be a world filled with discouragement. It can be a world in which we turn in on ourselves so completely that we do not see the train wreck coming. The call we face is to have the mind of Christ who, though He had it all, He was willing to humble Himself in order to give His life for us.

Do you want words of encouragement. Well, first let me go out on a limb and suggest to you that only God can create the universe and no science experiment in Switzerland is going to obliterate that creation. Secondly, god will not abandon His people but will continue to provide for our daily needs. Third, there is encouragement in living for Christ and for others - as we begin to look to the needs of one another we do find strength to walk through a discouraging world. And finally, our ultimate future is secure because Christ emptied himself, taking the cross so that eternal life could be ours. There is encouragement in Christ!

AMEN