

Be Ready: The Best is Yet to Come Phil 3:1-11

From Van Banke: The economy is so bad that:
I got a pre-declined credit card in the mail.

Hot Wheels and Matchbox stocks are trading higher than GM.

McDonald's is selling the 1/4 ounce burger.

Motel Six won't leave the light on anymore.

A young man goes into a fortuneteller who looks into a crystal ball and says, "You will be poor and unhappy until you are 45 or 50 years old." "Then what will happen?" asks the twenty-something. The fortune teller replies, "Then you'll get used to it." Things appear bad.

By now the world around us is getting ready for Easter. Last Tuesday was FAT Tuesday, the last day to act real bad before you have to prepare for Lent. The traditional purpose of Lent is the preparation of the believer — through prayer, penitence, almsgiving and self-denial — for the annual commemoration during Holy Week of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus, which recalls the events linked to the Passion of Christ and culminates in Easter, the celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Things maybe bad in our economy like they were bad for Jesus on the way to the cross but Easter reminds us that the best is yet to come.

Most folks really do not bother with Lent anymore except the Roman Catholic Church. We spend some time, effort, and money on Lent but we often miss the purpose behind the preparation. What is it all about, anyway?

Thank God for Easter. The church is preparing, too, not for a holiday but for a holy day. Our communities of faith are preparing the way for the Resurrection of Christ to come not only into our homes but into our hearts as well. Or is it better to say that we are preparing for the powerful resurrection coming of Christ, the Word made flesh, coming into the world again? Yes, Jesus didn't come for just you and me, but for the whole world. The Gospel makes its' universal reach clear: the good news isn't our little secret, our private possession or privilege; it's for all of God's children. Not just one people or one kind of people, or one nation, or one time in history, but for all of us, every nation, and every age. It's not just good news; it's really big news for us all, today, just as much as two thousand years ago. The truth is that the witness to the resurrection power after the resurrection is seen in Acts. The Gospel will not only encounter the poor, lame, halt, and blind, but also the synagogue rulers, high priests, governors, kings, treasurers, city officials, leading women, philosophers of Athens, captains of ships, imperial guards, and the emperor himself. God has plans for all the people.

The hour is at hand, the time has come for a radical change of heart and mind, a dramatic course adjustment, a renewal of our spirits. But you know, this becoming different isn't as difficult as it may seem. It's not like we don't already have it in us. It's sort of like the fella who stopped in the diner, ordered coffee, and when it came dumped the five packets of sugar remaining in the holder into it. He asked for more, but the waitress having seen him clear out the supply snapped and said, "Stir what you've got!" We've already got what it takes. Think of it this way. What would you do if you knew that you had only one day to live? That was the question Gunther Klempnauer asked 625 young students in 12 different German vocational schools. He reported a wide variety of responses including the expected: Get drunk, get a fix (money), get a girl. Some said they would spend the time with family, others wanted to climb a mountain or sail their boat, and yet others wanted to go on a picnic with friends. One student indicated that he would spend the time reviewing his photo albums and savoring the memories. An 18-year-old young woman wrote, "I would like to spend my last evening in church alone with God and thank him for my full and happy life." It is an arresting question and a daunting exercise to answer. A popular news columnist imagined what the world would be like if everyone suddenly knew there were only 24 hours left for them to live. He said the telephone circuits would be overloaded with desperate people trying to call family and friends in order to say, "I love you." Stir what you've got. Focus on your own need for forgiveness. Seek after that which Paul did— the resurrection power of God in his life. We all need make the journey this lenten season, follow the Lord, kneel in heart and adore in soul, the grace and beauty of God's salvation revealed in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the day to begin, the hour to move forward by spending ten minutes a day with Christ, so that when Easter arrives, and you are listening to or singing along with some Easter song you will know you have truly made your heart ready for becoming like Him in every way. This is what Paul was saying, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead." He means both now and then.

The founder of the Central City Mission in Jacksonville, Florida, Rev. Dr. Robert James Bateman, was a minister who was not afraid to get his hands dirty in the service of Christ. In 1904, Bateman came from England to personally lay the bricks of the mission in the city where drunken sailors poured into tattoo parlors, bars and whorehouses. While sharing the Gospel, he provided thousands of meals, clothed the needy, visited those in jail and housed the homeless. He was called "the man who distributed more human sunshine than any other in Jacksonville." One monthly report showed, Bateman's mission served 1,284 meals to hungry people. He took in 836 homeless men for the night. He found jobs for 182 men. He sent food baskets to 12 families. He helped "five wayward girls" escape the brothels. He found homes for four orphan boys. He took care of three babies which desperate mothers had abandoned on the steps of the mission. One newspaper said "The man who distributes more human sunshine than any other in Jacksonville."

Back in 1901 Bateman had labored in Baltimore where he once conducted a service in which only three boys came forward to receive Christ. Disappointing, right? Yet one of those boys was E. Stanley Jones, who became one of America's most effective and

famous Methodist missionaries and author of many books about Christ in India. In his autobiography, *A Song Of Ascents*, Jones describes Bateman: "Through his rough exterior I saw there was reality within. He was a converted alcoholic, on fire with God's love and I said to myself, I want what he has!... I accepted him for what he was – a devoted, diamond-in-the-rough winner of souls."

In 1912, a desperate letter from a girl employed in a brothel prompted Bateman to return to England to study methods of Christian social work. During a tour investigating these "houses" in London, the doctor also preached in revival services in English churches. On the return voyage to America, he conducted the only religious service aboard a ship of 2,207 people, concluding with his favorite hymn, "Nearer my God to Thee." That night at 11:45 p.m. the Titanic struck an iceberg. As Bateman escorted his sister-in-law to a lifeboat he said, "Don't be nervous, Annie. This will test our faith. I must stay and let the women go. If we never meet again on this earth, we will meet again in heaven. He threw his handkerchief into the descending lifeboat saying, "Put that around your throat. You'll catch cold." After he saw the women safely off the sinking ship, Bateman "Collected about 50 men on the stern of the ship and told them that they should prepare for death. And he led them in praying the Lord's Prayer," said a surviving passenger.

Edward A. Mueller, curator of the Jacksonville Maritime Museum, said, "Dr. Bateman and another man were also purported to have opened some of the steerage passageway doors to allow those mostly unfortunate and ill-fated passengers to escape." Ten days after the disaster, the widow received a letter from her dead husband. Bateman had written on shipboard and mailed the letter in Ireland when the Titanic had stopped for more passengers. "I feel that my trip has not been in vain," his letter said. "God has singularly blessed me. We had a glorious revival... It was the Time of My Life." His nephew received a letter mailed at the same time. "Tom, if this ship goes to the bottom, I shall not be there, I shall be up yonder. Think of it!" When the family pried open Bateman's roll-top desk, they found he had set his affairs in order. A poem on a card was left on top of his papers: Do you shudder as you picture/All the horrors of that hour? Ah! But Jesus was beside me/To sustain me by His power. And He came Himself to meet me/In that way so hard to tread/And with Jesus' arm to cling to/Could I have one doubt or dread?

The funeral service at First Baptist Church was the largest in Jacksonville's history at that time. Rich and poor hugged each other and wept. The minister said, "I somehow felt from the first that Dr. Bateman, ... as I knew him, I believed he would do just what he did in a crisis like that—help others to safety and take his chances among the last. With the ... spirit of Him who laid down his life for others, he stepped aside for the women and children and took his place with those marked for certain death. It was so like him. He died as he lived—serving others with a triumphant faith in God." That's how to live both as if today is the last day, and yet tomorrow still matters when: "(E)very valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." So how do we begin to prepare for Easter, praying, like Paul to know the power of His resurrection which is the salvation of God. Judy Baird sent this to me and it really is

good. It is called the KNOT'S PRAYER: DEAR GOD: PLEASE UNTIE THE KNOTS THAT ARE IN MY MIND, MY HEART, MY LIFE. REMOVE THE HAVE NOTS, THE CAN NOTS AND THE DO NOTS THAT I HAVE IN MY MIND. ERASE THE WILL NOTS, MAY NOTS, MIGHT KNOTS THAT MAY FIND A HOME IN MY HEART RELEASE ME FROM THE COULD NOTS, WOULD NOTS AND SHOULD NOTS THAT OBSTRUCT MY LIFE.

AND MOST OF ALL, DEAR GOD I ASK THAT YOU REMOVE FROM MY MIND, MY HEART AND MY LIFE ALL OF THE "AM NOTS" THAT I HAVE ALLOWED TO HOLD ME BACK, ESPECIALLY THE THOUGHT THAT I AM NOT GOOD ENOUGH. You were good enough for Jesus? Be good enough for yourself. Seek the power of His resurrection.