

# SERMON: Proper 23A

**Philippians 4:1-9 & Psalm 23**

Preached Sunday, Oct. 12, 2008 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

Has anyone else noticed how many funny bumper stickers there are these days?

When Jayne was still going back and forth to school in Asheville, she used to see some doozies. Many of them were political in nature, so I'll spare you those — at least until the election is finally over...

How many of these have you seen or heard?

"Having a wonderful time. Wish I were here."

"If You Don't Like My Driving, Stay Off the Sidewalk."

"Eat Right, Exercise Daily ... Die Anyway."

"My juvenile delinquent beat up your honor student."

*(Here's one that should be on my car):*

"CAUTION: Do not wash. This vehicle is undergoing a scientific dirt test."

"If You Can Read This, I've Lost My Trailer."

"Honk If Anything Falls Off."

"I Refuse to Have a Battle of Wits With an Unarmed Person."

"I child-proofed my house ... but they still got in."

Some bumper stickers have religious themes and are still humorous:

*This one pushes the envelope a bit:*

"Jesus Saves, Moses Invests, and Abraham blew it all on booze and women."

"Jesus called, and He wants his religion back!"

"Jesus is coming back soon; look busy!"

"In case of Rapture, may I have your car?"

As you know, some bumper stickers cannot be repeated here in this setting. Others are so offensive they should never have been printed.

By contrast, see what you think of these:

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

“Stand firm in the Lord.”

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice.”

“Do not worry about anything, but in everything ... let your requests be made known to God.”

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.”

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.”

Not as clever or funny as the others, perhaps. But these are the kind of words I want to hear at a time like this — when clever bumper stickers offer no comfort or hope.

Evidently, St. Paul and the author of the psalms thought the people of God needed to hear these things as well. Something encouraging. Something uplifting. Something to bolster their faith. And so, thousands of years later, we have these sacred words that can help us during our own time of trial.

“Do not worry about anything,” Paul writes to the Philippians, “but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable — if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise — think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you” (4:6-9).

Paul wrote these words while he was in prison. He wanted to reassure the Philippians that everything would be alright if they kept their focus where it needed to be. He says at the start of the letter that he wants them to be able to distinguish things that really matter from things that don’t (1:10, etc.). But, as we’re being reminded today, it’s hard to know which is which when a sense of panic prevails. Should we all pull our money out of the stock market? Is the government’s response enough to prevent a severe economic downturn? Are we facing a global recession or something worse? Will the next president have what it takes to lead us through the challenges we face? No one can answer these questions with a great deal of certainty.

Perhaps we do need a new set of slogans to remind us what’s really important. That if we make the Lord our shepherd, He will supply our needs. That if we stand firm in our faith, and turn to Christ when the going gets rough, God really will guard our hearts and minds with a sense of peace — even when we don’t know what the future holds.

Two days ago, I presided at the burial of Helen Kizer, a woman who was active here at St. Philip’s many years ago before she moved out of state. She’s someone I’d never

met, but heard about over the years. So I was honored to meet the members of Mrs. Kizer's family and help them say their final good-byes. They're a large and loving family. And they had arranged the burial site at St. Paul's in the Valley beautifully, with flowers and a small table adorned with photographs of Mrs. Kizer.

During the burial, we recited the traditional version of the 23rd Psalm. I was impressed to hear so many people say the words along with me from memory. I found out afterwards that most of them are active churchgoers and take great joy in their faith. In other words, they have a spiritual foundation that supports them when times are tough. Because they've been formed in the faith, they can remind each other that even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we don't need to be overwhelmed by fear. His rod and his staff will comfort us. Our faith helps us know that God does indeed restore our souls.

I was talking about bumper stickers a few minutes ago. Here is one I've seen on many bumpers and T-shirts. It's a saying that pretends to be clever, but is not nearly as funny or insightful as it thinks it is:

"Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to the garage makes you a car."

Pretty deep, huh? And yet, it obviously speaks to the people who slap it on the back of their cars or have it spelled out on their shirts.

In case you didn't catch all of it, here it is one more time:

"Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to the garage makes you a car."

Let's stop and consider that for a moment. It sounds clever — as long as you don't reflect on what it's actually saying. Did you ever know anyone who never took his car to a mechanic? (I'm not talking about people who repair their own cars, but people who are too poor or too lazy to take their car to get it serviced.) Even if you haven't, you can guess what happens. Eventually, something quits working — something which may help the car run safely. And we know what comes next: either an accident or the car being abandoned by the side of the road.

So, it's true that you don't have to ever go to a garage — if you don't care about having a vehicle that actually works or runs safely. But for everyone else, we wouldn't think about not going to the garage at least once or twice a year. The same holds true for going to the doctor or the dentist. Similar logic applies to being part of a faith community. Those T-shirts and bumper stickers are probably bought by people who want to think of themselves as Christians, even though they don't attend any church. Now, I grant you that there may be a few extraordinary individuals who manage to be decent people, say their prayers, love their neighbors as themselves and do good works — without going to church. But not many. And here's why there aren't many such people in the world: we simply cannot live out our faith as solitary individuals. We need fellow believers, corporate worship and organized ministries to help us be

who God intends us to be! Being a Christian means being a member of the Body of Christ. It means being baptized, nurtured in the Christian faith, and formed by the teachings and ongoing life of the Church.

Paul said it over and over in the New Testament: the Church is the Body of Christ. And we know how bodies work. If a limb is cut off from the body, it cannot receive life-giving blood or the neural impulses which guide and direct its actions. Unless the limb is sewn back onto the body very quickly, it will become useless and lifeless. And the body will not be able to function well without it. So it is with individual believers. We need to remember that we're part of something bigger than ourselves, bigger than our own personal interests, needs and desires. We are baptized into something that helps us grow into the full stature of Christ, into the image and likeness of God. That can't happen without being part of a local, living body of believers.

Many years ago, Norman Cousins wrote an editorial in The Saturday Review. In his editorial, he reported a conversation he had while traveling in India. He was talking with a Hindu priest named Satis Prasad. The Hindu said he wanted to come to our country to work as a missionary among the Americans. Cousins assumed that he intended to convert Americans to Hinduism. But, when asked, Prasad said, "Oh no: I would like to convert them to the Christian religion. Christianity cannot survive in the abstract. It needs ... believers. The people of your country may claim they believe in Christianity, but from what I read at this distance, Christianity is more a custom than anything else. I would ask that either you accept the teachings of Jesus in your everyday life and in your affairs as a nation, or stop invoking His name as sanction for everything you do. I want to help save Christianity for the Christian."\*

Although it makes a point, this criticism is not completely fair. We know many who have lived out the teachings of Jesus in their own day and time. We call them saints. But to be a saint, there needs to be a school for sainthood and a hospital for sinners. That school and that hospital is the church — for most of us here today, it's this church.

Now is not the time for us to be less than we're supposed to be. It's not the time to shrink back and circle the wagons. Now is the time for us to really be the Church: to be here for each other when the going gets tough, to continue to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ, and to be there for the vulnerable, the lonely and the poor.

This church is made up of individual Christians. Together, we can continue to be the Church if we all re-commit ourselves to this vital task. That's part of what next Sunday is all about. Please join us and help us continue to be the Body of Christ in this place.

Stand firm in the Lord. And the peace of God — which surpasses all understanding — will guard our hearts and minds in Christ.

AMEN.

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\*B. Clayton Bell, Preaching, May-June, 1986.