A Sermon by Pastor Santmire October 10, 1993

SPEAK UP AND HOLD ON

"Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live." (Ezekiel 18:31-32)

You'll probably remember the oft-repeated remark of President John F. Kennedy: "Life isn't fair." It turned out that that remark was tragically illusrated in his own life, when he was gunned down in the prime of life.

Life isn't fair. You don't have to probe too deeply into history or into your own experience to figure that one out. Why did more than 20,000 people, including many children, have to die in an earthquake in India? Why did so many women in the former Yugoslavia have to be raped? Why should a couple of boys from the backwoods of Maine have to be shot down and killed the other day in Somalia?

Why did a young man in Manchester, a devoted member of his church and a devoted father, formerly a member here, have come down with brain cancer? Why did my own sister, only fifty years old, suddenly come down with brain cancer?

Life isn't fair. That's where I want to begin this morning, with that commonplace, sometimes devastating, experience. And I want to address that experience with this Word, which I derive from our text today: Speak Up and Hold On.

I.

First: Speak Up. It's no accident that we encounter the ancient people of God in our first lesson this morning -- speaking up. That's been characteristic of the people of God throughout the ages. There's even a bitterness to the tone of their speaking up, in this case. They've fallen to repeating a pessimistic proverb that was probably common in the society of their time: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." That is to say, lots of things are happening to innocents, like children, that have no reason for happening. In the language of our world: lots bad things are happening to good people.

Sour grapes? You bet your life. The people of Israel are feeling sour grapes. Why should they have to live as slaves in a strange land? Why should they have to suffer all the indignities and the oppressions of a subjugated nation? Why should their daughters have to be man-handled and their sons sent off to the front lines of war?

They even come right out and say it. Not life's unfair. They say to the Lord God Himself -- You're unfair. When they encounter the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, they speak up.

I say that's no accident. Remember the Book of Job. The lament of Job echoes throughout the Bible. You're not fair, Job says to the Lord God. Likewise, for the Psalmist, again and again, in words like these, which you know so well: "My God, my God, why have you foraken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but find no rest." (Ps. 22:1-2)

You know these words, of course, because Jesus Himself made them His own, on the Cross. He lifted up the ancient lament and the bitter complaint of the people of God throughout the ages in one long and anguished cry -- My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani!

This is your baptismal birthright, child of God. When you experience the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, speak up. When all of a sudden, or perhaps after long years of agonizing reflection, it becomes painfully apparent to you that life's unfair, speak up.

Speak up to God as the ancient people of God did, as Job did, as the Psalmist often did, and, above all, as our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ did, from the Cross. Speak up.

That's basically what I said to my sister one time this week, as we cried together, with the news of her impending death. It's unfair, Mary. It's unfair. And our tears, I told her, are screaming to the heavens, it's unfair.

says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live."

With the promise that vibrates in these words, you're getting a lot more than you ever bargained for. You turn to God -- and, my God, He's there!

The international news carried a heartwarming philanthropic story from Nepal the other day. It seems that an earthquake had leveled a Buddhist monastery situated at 14,000 feet, high in the Hamalyas. In recent years that monastery had become a place of pilgrimage for those who were seeking to ascend to the peak of nearby Mt. Everest, some 15,000 feet still higher. In memory of those spiritual heights, many former climbers and their friends donated sufficient funds to rebuild that monastery.

So we're often inclined to think about religion. To find God you've got to go to some Mt. Everest, somewhere. To find God you've got to find that very special experience, high and lifted up, away from it all; and then perchance, if you're one of the few spiritually gifted people in the world and if you've followed a lifelong discipline, it may be given you to experience something of the Divine. That's the way of many of the world's religions.

Not so, according to the Bible. Sure, the Bible knows that God can declare Himself and His glory from the mountains. The Bible takes that for granted. But that's not the really good news. The really good news of the Bible is that God doesn't stay way up there in the ethereal heavens waiting for you or me to climb up to Him, if we can somehow find the strength to make it that far. On the contrary, God leaves the mountain peak and comes down to you, where you are, even in the pits of your despair.

This is the story above all of Christ Jesus, as we have it in this morning's second lesson, in the words of Paul, where Paul says of Christ -- "though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross." (Phil. 2:5-8)

You see, when you turn to God, when you speak up to God, you're going to be overwhelmed! You don't have to go up to Mt. Everest to find God. God's right there with you, right down there with you, in the pits of your despair. God's right there in the person of the Savior, extending His hand to you.

Remember Mary Magdalene at the tomb? She went there early in the morning, while it was still dark, overwhelmed by her grief, scarcely able to see, I imagine, because of her tears. There she stands staring tearfully into the tomb, where her beloved Jesus had been placed. Then she hears a voice behind her: "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" (Jn. 20:15)

Mary speaks up in her own way, in exasperation, supposing the speaker to be the gardener -- "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." But then Jesus calls her by name, and she turns and recognizes Him!

This is the witness of the whole Bible. You don't have to go searching for God, God has already come searching for you! Above all, in the person of the Savior, He extends His hand to you, as you stand there by your tomb, in the pits of your despair. This is why I'm telling you today -- not just to speak up, but to hold on. When you turn to God with your lament, take hold of His hand that He's extending to you!

I'm tired, Lord. I'm weak, Lord. I'm worn, Lord. Take my hand, Lord. Because I need to hold on to you. That's the only way I can get through. Hear my cry, hear my call, hold my hand, lest I fall.

This past week, while I've been living with the news of my own sister's brain cancer, it's sudden onset and it's deadly prospect, I feel that I've cried out every drop of tears that I could ever muster. But in the midst of it all, I want to tell you now, I've experienced this overwhelming blessing -- the presence of the Savior.

One of you stopped by to see me at home one day, when I had tried to shut out the whole world, because it all was too painful to bear. And your voice was also the voice of Jesus for me.

My dear wife has held me, again and again, at all hours of the day and night. And her touch has also been the touch of the living Lord for me.