

Sermon for Thanksgiving Day, November 23, 1972 by Andrew A. Jumper, D. D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"STANDING IN THE BREACH"

A Sermon for Christian Americans

Ezekiel 22:23-31

Text: "And I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found none." Ezekiel 22:30

In the days that Ezekiel wrote, the Hebrew nation was going to ruin. This was true not because God was unwilling to bless the people. Indeed, our text for this morning says that God looked for even one man who would build up the wall and stand in the breach that he might not destroy the land. Yet, the Bible says that he found none. Part of the problem was that the princes were out for what they could get. As Ezekiel puts it, "Her princes in the midst of her are like a roaring lion tearing the prey; they have devoured human lives; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows in the midst of her."

But, it is a fact of life that when the leaders of a nation are able to get away with such practices it is because the people themselves share their attitudes and ethics. Thus, Ezekiel writes of the people, "the people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the sojourner without redress." So not only were the leaders corrupt, the people were corrupt. What was needed in such a situation was spiritual leadership. What was needed was men who would call the nation back to God. What was needed was someone to give clear cut moral standards, to point to the unequivocal laws of God. Yet, Ezekiel says of God, "and I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for all the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found none."

The fact is, the Hebrew nation was desperately in need of someone to speak a clear word for God. Yet, Ezekiel tells us, "Her priests have done violence to my law and have profaned my holy things; they have made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean....I am profaned among them."

On this Thanksgiving Day as we are gathered here to worship God and to express our thanksgiving to him for his many blessings, all of us have many reasons for gratitude. Compared to most of the people of the world, God has blessed us with material goods beyond the imagining of most. Compared to most of the people of the world, we enjoy freedom that few men even dare dream of. Yes, we have much for which to be thankful today.

Yet, I would remind us this morning that with privilege comes duty; with blessings come responsibility; or, as the Bible puts it, to whom much is given, much is required.

With this in mind let me remind us that there is much corruption in high places today. As in the days of Ezekiel, many of our princes are irresponsible and look to their own benefit to the exclusion of others. Also, let me remind us that we live in a day in which we have fostered irresponsibility; in which we have encouraged dishonesty; in which we have supported corruption. As a consequence, our newspapers are filled with stories of robbery, murder, rape, theft and all sorts of heinous crimes. Too many of the people share the attitudes and ethics of their leaders.

In the day of Ezekiel the root of the problem lay in the fact that the church was

not speaking the word of God. Instead, it whitewashed the rulers and the people. Ezekiel wrote, "and her prophets have daubed for them with whitewash, seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying, 'Thus says the Lord God,' when the Lord has not spoken."

Is it any different in our nation today? Our religious leaders, through such organizations as the National Council of Churches has supported subversion, has opposed prayer and Bible reading in public schools, has consorted with our enemies in Hanoi and participated in marches and demonstrations designed to destroy the effectiveness of our government. We have seen our sister denomination, the United Presbyterian Church, contribute \$10,000 to the Angela Davis fund and \$25,000 to the defense of the Black Panthers. We have seen one of her pastors in Chicago let his church be used to defraud the government of almost a million dollars and then plead for the criminals to be refunded, even when it was admitted that the church had housed sex parties and drug parties. In our own denomination we have seen a seminary professor officially listed as a member of the communist party; we have seen some of our so-called leaders go to Paris to interfere with the peace talks; we have seen some of these same people go to Washington in an effort to interfere with the orderly process of government. And just the other day a friend of mine told me of talking to one of our ministers in a key position. During the course of that conversation the man admitted that he could not take the biblical record of Jesus seriously and that he was still in search of the historical Jesus. I was just wondering, should he find that Jesus he is looking for, what will he have on the Jesus of the Bible?

So, as the priests of Ezekiel had done, so our religious leaders today "have done violence to my law and have profaned my holy things; they have made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean...I am profaned among them." At the heart of the problems that face America lies a departure from the historic faith that brought our forefathers to this land and which has made it great across the years. Any solution to today's problems will lie in a revival of those values that sustained us. If such a revival is to come, it must come from conservative, evangelical churches such as this one and from committed Christians such as yourselves. If princes are corrupt it is because the people are corrupt; and if the people are corrupt it is because the priests--the religious leaders--have lied to them and have failed to speak a clear and certain word from the Lord. God today is looking for brave men and women committed to Jesus Christ to build up the wall and to stand in the breach.

Back in 1956 Nikita Khrushchev said, "A communist has no right to be a mere onlooker." Later, he shouted at us Americans, "Your grandchildren will grow up under communism!" By the same token, if we want our grandchildren to grow up under Christianity and under democracy, the Christian has no right to be a mere onlooker.

Theodore Roosevelt once said, speaking of government, "If the good people do not like the way politicians behave, they should either get into politics or stop complaining...it is not the critic who counts....The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short...but knows great enthusiasm and great devotion and spends himself." The same is true in the religious arena. It is not the critic who counts for it is easy to criticize. No, the one who counts--and the church that counts--is the one who gets in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who knows great devotion and who spends himself."

Today is Thanksgiving. We have so much for which to be grateful and for which we can give thanks--far more so than our forefathers who celebrated that first Thanksgiving. Yet, with privilege goes duty, with blessings go responsibility. Today as America celebrates Thanksgiving she needs brave men and women, committed Christians, to build up the wall and to stand in the breach for Jesus. I challenge you individually and I challenge us all as a congregation to be such a man and to be such a church as God is seeking today to stand before him in the breach that he might not destroy the land.

EXCERPTS FROM A SPEECH BY GENERAL DOUGLAS MacARTHUR

Yes, those early Americans were thankful. They were thankful that they had survived another year and that they had abundance to see them through the coming winter. But across the years their gratitude had reason to expand as God blessed the land, as he created a new nation. But with God's gift of a new country, he also gave us Duty and Honor. On May 12, 1962, General of the Army Douglas MacArthur went to West Point to receive the Sylvanus Thayer Award for service to his nation. In a speech made from the heart and without using any notes at all, General MacArthur spoke to the young cadets on the theme, "Duty, Honor and Country." On this Thanksgiving Day as we express gratitude to God, it is surely appropriate to express gratitude to those brave young men who, across the years, have protected our land, our homes, from those who would destroy it. On that May day in 1962 General MacArthur said to those young soldiers:

"Duty, Honor, Country:....these words teach you to be proud and unbending in honest failure, but humble and gentle in success; not to substitute words for action, nor to seek the path of comfort, but to face the stress and spur of difficulty and challenge; to learn to stand up in the storm, but to have compassion on those who fall; to master yourself before you seek to master others; to have a heart that is clean, a goal that is high; to learn to laugh, yet never forget how to weep; to reach into the future, yet never neglect the past; to be serious, yet never to take yourself too seriously; to be modest so that you will remember the simplicity of true greatness; the open mind of true wisdom, the meekness of true strength....

And what sort of soldiers are those you are to lead? Are they reliable? Are they brave? Are they capable of victory?

Their story is known to all of you. It is the story of the American man at arms. My estimate of him was formed on the battlefield many, many years ago, and has never changed. I regarded him then, as I regard him now, as one of the world's noblest figures; not only as one of the finest military characters, but also as one of the most stainless.

His name and fame are the birthright of every American citizen. In his youth and strength, his love and loyalty, he gave all that mortality can give. He needs no eulogy from me, or from any other man. He has written his own history and written it in red on his enemy's breast...

WITNESS TO THE FORTITUDE

In 20 campaigns, on a hundred battlefields, around a thousand camp fires, I have witnessed that enduring fortitude, that patriotic self-abnegation, and that invincible determination which have carved his stature in the hearts of his people.

From one end of the world to the other, he has drained deep the chalice of courage. As I listened to those songs of the glee club, in memory's eye I could see those staggering columns of the first World War, bending under soggy packs on many a weary march, from dripping dusk to drizzling dawn, slogging ankle deep through mire of shell-pocked roads; to form grimly for the attack, blue-lipped, covered with sludge and mud, chilled by the wind and rain, driving home to their objective, and for many, to the judgment seat of God...

I do not know the dignity of their birth, but I do know the glory of their death. They died unquestioning, uncomplaining, with faith in their hearts, and on their lips the hope that we would go on to victory.

You now face a new world, a world of change. The thrust into outer space of the

satellite, spheres and missiles marks a beginning of another epoch in the long story of mankind. In the five or more billions of years the scientists tell us it has taken to form the earth, in the three or more billion years of development of the human race, there has never been a greater, a more abrupt or staggering evolution.

We deal now, not with things of this world alone, but with the illimitable distances and as yet unfathomed mysteries of the universe. We are reaching out for a new and boundless frontier. We speak in strange terms of harnessing the cosmic energy, of making winds and tides work for us...of the primary target in war, no longer limited to the armed forces of an enemy, but instead to include his civil populations; of ultimate conflict between a united human race and the sinister forces of some other planetary galaxy; of such dreams and fantasies as to make life the most exciting of all times.

The soldier above all other people prays for peace, for he must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war. But always in our ears ring the ominous words of Plato, that wisest of all philosophers: "Only the dead have seen the end of war."

The shadows are lengthening for me. The twilight is here. My days of old have vanished--tone and tint. They have gone glimmering through the dreams of things that were. Their memory is one of wonderous beauty, watered by tears and coaxed and caressed by the smiles of yesterday. I listen vainly, but with thirsty ear, for the witching melody of faint bugles blowing reveille, of far drums beating the long roll.

In my dreams I hear again the crash of guns, the rattle of musketry, the strange, mournful mutter of the battlefield. But in the evening of my memory always I come back to West Point. Always there echoes and re-echoes: Duty, honor, country.