

Sermon for Sunday, August 10, 1980, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri 63105

"WHAT'S ALL THIS JESUS JAZZ?"

Ephesians 6:10-20

Text: "Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand
in the evil day, and having done all, to stand." Ephesians 6:13

Several weeks ago a man whom I did not know called and asked for an appointment. As it turned out, he was having serious personal and marital problems. Since I did not know him and since he was a Catholic, I asked him why he had come to me. He explained that his present business partner was a man with whom he had worked some years before they established their present relationship. Back then his friend's life had been as messed up as his life was now. Back then his friend had been in financial trouble with the company they worked for and lost his job, he was running around on his wife, they were on the verge of divorce, and their teenage daughter was in serious trouble. But now things were radically different with his friend. He was doing well in his own business, his home life was happy and stable, and there was a new radiance about him. His friend had come into a dynamic relationship to Jesus Christ and it had made all the difference in the world. The man said to me, "Will you share with me what you shared with my friend? What is all this stuff about Jesus?"

That question brought back a rush of memories. I remembered when his friend's daughter had asked me the identical question. Back then she had been in her mid-teens when she came to my study. She was there because something had happened that she didn't understand and she wanted to know what had happened. Some months before her parents had been on the verge of divorce and she had been delighted. She hated her mother and planned to live with her father. But something had happened. Mother had come into a personal relationship to Jesus and suddenly she had changed. Her father at first had trouble accepting a wife who was so dramatically different. But, as he began to realize what had happened to her was real, he too, began to seek for what she had found. Now their marriage had changed and the daughter couldn't understand or accept the new relationship. She looked at me with puzzled eyes and said, "What is all this Jesus jazz?"

She had seen a shrew of a mother change before her eyes; she had seen a father drop an illicit relationship and become a new person. She had good reason to ask, "What is all this Jesus jazz?" This morning I would like to share with you some of the things I try to share with troubled people who ask that question.

One translation of our text for this morning reads this way: "Therefore, take up God's armour; then you will be able to stand your ground when things are at their worst..." The man in my office that day had seen the life of his friend when things were at their worst, but now he saw a family able to stand its ground. He had a right to ask about all this Jesus jazz.

Notice first that you can stand your ground when things are at their worst because you discover you are someone to stand. One of the biggest problems some people have today is a low opinion of themselves. We are constantly trying to prove to the world and to ourselves that we are a person of worth. I'll tell you the truth, I have never known of an instance when a man got involved in and

extra-marital relationship because of sheer sex needs. No, at base his problem has been the need to prove that someone cares about him, that he is still attractive to someone, that he is a person of worth. I have watched wives nag and manipulate their husbands until their relationship is a disaster. Why? Because she is trying to get a response from him that gives her the assurance she is loved and cherished, that she is a person of worth.

Dr. John Redhead tells of the journalist in New York who took his own life. The note he left behind read, "I have run from house to house, from wife to wife, from country to country in a vain endeavor to get away from myself. I have done what I have done because I am fed up with the necessity of inventing devices for getting through 24 hours a day." That is what happens to life when you do not feel you are a person of worth, that you are someone to stand.

But move over into the atmosphere of the New Testament and see what a different air you breath! Once you look at the cross of Jesus Christ--once you understand how much he loved you; once you understand that had you been the only person in the whole world, still he would have died for you--even you!--then you can never think lowly of yourself again. No, you are not the off-spring of the apes, just spending your life monkeying around, but you are the tadpole of an archangel. You are not a meaningless mass of dancing dirt evolved from nowhere and going nowhere, but you are the creation of God, filled with His image, and loved by Him. So, all that Jesus jazz says first of all that you are a person of worth. You are, after all, someone very special and someone very loved and cared about.

Notice in the second place that you can stand your ground when things are at their worst because all that Jesus jazz gives you something to stand on. Is life--is history--going anywhere worth going? Or, as one cynic put it, is life just one bad thing after another, destined to end in a cosmic wreck? When a baby is born deformed and retarded, does life have meaning? When a loved one is snatched away, does life mean anything? When dreams collapse, when business fails, when a job is lost, is anything worthwhile? You see, it is precisely here that this Jesus jazz gives us something to stand on. Shaw, in his masterful play, "Joan of Arc," has her facing the stake and speaking to her executioners. This is what she says: "Yes, I am alone on earth. I have always been alone. Do not think you can frighten me by telling me that I am alone...it is better to be alone with God: His friendship will not fail me, nor His counsel, nor His love. In His strength I will dare, and dare, and dare until I die." She could stand her ground when things were at their worst because she had something to stand on and she could dare and dare and dare.

You see, as long as you believe that what we call history is the gradual unfolding of a divine purpose which will, in the end, get itself worked out, then you have got something to stand on. If God is in control, then not even an Iran or a Russia or a ballistic missile can rock the boat and you have something to stand on. "I had fainted," said the Psalmist, "unless I had believed." Or, as St. Paul once put it, "all things work together for good for them that love God..." And when we know that, we can stand our ground when things are at their worst because we have something to stand on.

Notice in the third place that this Jesus jazz gives us something to stand for. What many people stand for today is not very flattering. Five years ago when Watergate rocked America, we discovered it was only the tip of the national

iceberg of immorality and deceit. The so-called Billygate is but another ripple of the waves that are rocking our nation. It is fascinating to observe that many of our national leaders are beginning to recognize the need for a moral renewal in this country and that Governor Reagan ended his acceptance speech for the Republican nomination for president with a call to prayer. We are all painfully aware that we don't stand for much anymore.

For example, look at this picture presented in a letter to the editor of a magazine, written by a young girl. "Dear Sir," she wrote, "I drink, I gamble, I go out with men. My parents do not know these things, or at least don't seem to know. Understand I'm not out with a tough crowd, just the boys and girls of the best families I was brought up with. What bothers me is all the older folks having faith in us, and these preachers standing around telling us how fine and good we are. Next time I go on a party I think I'll kidnap a preacher and take him along. Maybe his next sermon will be about sin. And that is what we need. Did my mother do these things I am doing when she was a girl? Did my older sister? If I keep on doing these things will I go to heaven or hell? These are the things that are bothering me. Please write something to quiet my mind or I shall surely go mad."

Here is a girl who had nothing to stand for, and when the strain of life is put on her, the chances are she will fall. But look at this other picture. Back during the Viet Nam conflict, many stories were run about the children of American soldiers with Vietnamese prostitutes for mothers. When one young man returned from duty there, his father called him aside. "Son," he said, "I've been reading about our men in Viet Nam and the television has shown pictures of the little children of American service men, all because our men cast their morals to the wind. I've been wondering son, is it possible I have a grandchild in that country?" The boy answered, "Of course not, Dad. Don't you know there are some things men with the name of Christian can be trusted not to do?"

You see, it makes a difference in standing up to life if we have something to stand for--an ideal, a code of honor, a pattern of behavior, a blueprint for conduct. The person who has no moral ideals or codes, who does whatever the current fad happens to be, will have difficulty holding his footing in life. But the person who has gone all out for Jesus--the one who has surrendered his life to the Master--will be able to stand when things are at their worst because he has something to stand for. There are some things that those of us who carry the name of Jesus can be trusted not to do.

So, all of this Jesus jazz means you are someone to stand, a person of worth; it means you have something to stand on, for you know that life and history is the unfolding of God's divine plan; it means you have something to stand for that is worth living for and dying for. Carlyle, in one of his great books, writes of Martin Luther's appearance before the Diet of Worms on April 17, 1521. He makes this comment about that event: "(this) may be considered the greatest scene in modern European history, the point indeed, from which the whole subsequent history of civilization takes its rise. The world's pomp and power sits there on this hand: on that stand up for God's truth one man, the son of the poor miner, Hans Luther. It is the greatest moment in modern history. English Puritanism, England and its parliaments, the Americas, the French revolution, Europe and its work everywhere at present--the germ of it all lay there; had Luther in that moment done other, it had all been otherwise." Yes, had Luther

done other--but Luther did not do other. He had something to stand for. As Luther himself put it that fateful day, "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me."

Yes, someone to stand, something to stand on, something to stand for. Notice last of all that more than anything else, that jazz about Jesus gives you someone to stand by you when things are at their worst. That, most of all, is what we need. In standing up to life it is worth more than all else to have someone to stand by us, someone who, when our morale begins to crack, when we begin to lose faith in ourselves and in our ideals, can reach down and touch us with a steadying hand.

Back during the closing year of World War II, a minister in New York received the following letter: "Dear Sir: I'm a sailor, and I'll be pulling out in a few hours. I came into your church this morning lonely as I could be and scared to death about sailing again. I wanted to talk to someone pretty bad, and there was a girl who said hello to me. She said for me to sit down and we started talking about the future. I said maybe there wouldn't be any future for me. If only a fellow could be sure, I said, that something would come through worth dying for, it wouldn't be so bad. And then she said the queerest things. She smiled and said, 'That's easy. Christ is coming through and He's worth dying for.' I looked at her, and she kept talking as if he were alive, and a good pal of hers. I sort of expected to see him walk in the door, it was so real. I was only there about ten minutes; and I don't know why, but her talking to me like that sort of did something to me, and I'm not lonely anymore, and I'm not scared."

Yes, life brings us those times when we need someone to reach down and steady us; we need someone to stand by us so that we can say, "I'm not lonely anymore, and I'm not scared." The Psalmist wrote, "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me."

I don't know about you, but that's what I need. I need to know that I am a person of worth and that Jesus died for me. I need something to stand on, to know that God is in control when life seems to be going to pieces. I need something to stand for, that will help me keep my balance in life. But most of all I need someone--someone who comes to stand beside me and who puts a steadying hand on my shoulder so that I'm not lonely or afraid anymore.

Is that what you need?