

*The Collected Sermons of*  
**Fred B.  
Craddock**

Fred B. Craddock

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## Foreword

The book you hold in your hands is like no other book you have ever read. This is fitting, since Fred Craddock is like no other preacher you have ever heard. If you have worshiped with him, then I need say no more. You know all about the voice, the timing, the stature, the gaze. If you have not worshiped with him, then prepare to be a little disoriented, for you are about to overhear sermons that happened without you.

“It’s good to see you again this morning,” the first one begins, but who is “you” and when was the last time, so that this time is “again”?

“This is a very refreshing place and we all need it,” begins another, but where is this place and who are “we”? Who, for that matter, are Steve, Bill, Robin, Richard, Wesley, or Birdie, who show up in these sermons as naturally as Peter, James, or John?

“As you know we are now one week away,” begins a third sermon, but by now you are getting the hang of it. You have walked into the middle of a conversation between this preacher and the particular people sitting right in front of him. Even if *you* do not know what will happen a week from now, *they* do—just as they know who they are, where they are, and who is standing in the pulpit before them speaking directly to their condition.

This comes as something of a relief since it means the reader of this volume is not in charge. You are a guest here, not a host. You do not have to know everything about the people sitting around you. You do not have to understand the relationship between this preacher and these people. You do not even have to know what day it is. All you have to do is settle down so you can overhear the gospel, which may be how you discover that these sermons speak directly to your own condition too.

How can this be, since the preacher has never laid eyes on you? I could not begin to say. All I can say, with complete confidence, is that reading these sermons one after another will take you places you have never been between the covers of a book.

As Fred says in his introduction, there is a big difference between reading speaking and reading writing. The sermon is “an event in the world of sound,” he says, a “self-consuming artifact” that lives for the ear, not the page. Things can happen in a sanctuary between a preacher and a congregation that are not reducible to print. What caused one person to doze while another

wept? Why did people laugh at the first story but not the second one? What made all the babies stop crying at once?

Worship is like that. However tight the script, the Holy Spirit moves between the lines. However sure the preacher is about where she is going, everyone in the room can end up somewhere else. There is a “surplus of meaning lurking in every good sermon as in every biblical text,” Fred says, keenly aware of how much this surplus depends on the physical presence of a trusted speaker with a familiar audience. For this reason among many, a book of sermons is a very odd duck.

If you are reading this one for your own soul’s health, then my advice is not to think about it too much. Just let the words do their deeply intuitive work, leading you to notice things you have never noticed before, feel things further down than you are used to feeling them, and think things you want to think about some more. You need never fear that this preacher will use these things to bend you to his will, because he is not like that. He gives you his words, trusting you to know what to do with them.

If, on the other hand, you are reading this book because you want to preach more like Fred Craddock does, then proceed with caution. I once witnessed a seminarian the size of an NFL linebacker try to impersonate him in a sermon and it was not a pretty sight. The voice was all wrong for the body. The posture did not go with the words. The bad news, I am afraid, is that to preach like Fred Craddock you have to *be* Fred Craddock. Flip this truth over, however, and you find the good news on the other side: if you want to preach like he does, then be who *you* are—inhabiting your own body, using your own voice, finding your own language, noticing your own life.

This may take some practice, since it is often hard for preachers to trust that the standard equipment package for human beings is adequate for the proclamation of the gospel. Surely a deeper voice would help, a taller frame, a more sophisticated vocabulary, a less routine life . . . ? While there are certainly things preachers can do to enrich both the interior and exterior worlds they inhabit, the first and best thing they can do is to come home to themselves. How does a preacher discover her voice? She learns to use the voice she has. How does a preacher establish his authority? He abandons all guile.

The first time I heard Fred Craddock was 1978, when he delivered the Beecher Lectures on Preaching at Yale Divinity School. I had been out of seminary for two years by then, working as a secretary during the week and helping out at a local church on weekends. While I was just beginning to imagine myself an ordained minister, imagining myself a preacher was not part of the deal. The Episcopal Church had only been ordaining women priests for a couple of years. I had never seen a woman in a clerical collar, much less heard one preach. With a little effort I could imagine myself a

pastor, a teacher, a counselor to youth. When I tried to imagine myself a preacher, my mind went blank.

The lights came on for me the day Fred Craddock stepped into the pulpit of Marquand Chapel. His head and shoulders were just visible above the top of the podium. He made a joke about this as he cranked the microphone down to his height. “They always set these things for adults,” he said, or “*I am standing up.*” I have heard him begin like this so many times through the years that I no longer remember what he said the first time I heard him. Whatever it was, it let the rest of us know that we could laugh with him—because the truth is often funny, and things so seldom turn out the way any of us expects.

For the next hour he continued to foil our expectations in memorable ways. His voice went with his body. He could do things with it that stayed in the ear long after he finished speaking. There was no separating *what* he said from *how* he said it. He spoke of Kierkegaard as easily as he spoke of the Indianapolis 500. He quoted Kafka as helpfully as Corinthians. Clearly, this was a man with great skills in the disciplines of theology and philosophy as well as biblical studies and homiletics, but he was also someone who noticed a lot about ordinary human life on earth.

Time and again, he said things I wanted to say but did not know how. He put words to my music, gave voice to my better angels. *Yes, I thought, that’s exactly what it’s like. Yes, that’s just how it feels. Yes, I’ve always wondered about that but I never heard anyone say it out loud before.* Every now and then he would reach high over my head to bring something down where I could handle it for myself, but he did this so unassumingly that I never felt stupid.

“You know as well as I,” he said, when I did not know.

“As you probably have already anticipated,” he said, when I did not have a clue.

“All of you will be aware,” he said, when I was not aware—yet the cumulative effect of such phrases was to lift me up and draw me in to the conversation he was having with his listeners. I wanted to know what he thought I already knew. I wanted to join the community of the aware.

By the time Fred finished his last lecture, he had not only described another way to preach; he had also shown me how it was done, so that for the first time it was possible for me to imagine myself a preacher too.

In the years since then I have heard him preach a hundred times without ever figuring out how he does it. How does he use such simple language to convey such luminous and sometimes difficult truths? How does he see the sorts of things we all see—people eating in restaurants, children pushing each other around—and see more than we see? How does he say what he sees so that it goes straight to the heart?

Part of the problem, of course, is that there is no analyzing Fred while he is talking. The minute he starts I am a goner. All I want to do is listen to the stories, join the laughter, make the connections. After about twenty minutes I always start getting anxious because I know he is going to sit down soon—always too soon!—and I know the whole sermon is going to snap back on itself depending on where he decides to end it. I am not sure even he knows when he is going to end it, but nine times out of ten it takes my breath away.

For this reason among many others, being able to read a whole volume of Fred's sermons provides a different kind of pleasure than hearing them in person one at a time. There is still plenty in these pages to grab the heart, spark the will, and work the mind—indeed, it is hard to recall a single page that does not do one or more of those things—yet there is also the opportunity to note how this preacher does what he does even when he is not standing right there in front of you.

Here are some things I notice about how Fred does what he does.

He trusts emotion and intuition to light the way into a text as much as he trusts education and intelligence. Just try to reduce one of these sermons to outline form and you will see what I mean. There you are sailing along, thinking you know what this sermon is about, when all of a sudden Fred starts telling a story that has no apparent connection to the theme you had picked out for him. Stick with him and the connection will become apparent—or not—but either way this preacher does not map his sermons with a ruler but with a heart. He speaks to his listeners the same way the text speaks to him, which almost never involves the shortest distance between point A and point B.

He uses lovely and concrete language to evoke visceral response. Both descriptors are necessary, I think, since lovely language is more likely to woo the ear than language that is merely correct. Fred chooses his words with such care that they arrive like specially selected gifts—never too pricey, never too precious—just exactly the right words to describe what he wants to convey. Their concreteness has everything to do with their familiarity. When he describes a potato as small as a marble, it is so real you can hold it in your hand. When he repeats a conversation between two people in a church parking lot, it is so recognizable that you can almost name the people.

He tells the truth about things, even when the truth is that he does not like a particular parable much or that he once avoided eating lunch with a man who drooled. Whether he is telling you something about himself or about someone he knows, the frankness of his observations can strike so close that you want to cover your head. *How did he know that about you?* Since he is believable at this level, he becomes believable at every level, even when he moves on to things as high as the meaning of the cross, the purpose of the

church, or the love of God. I do not know what it costs him to be so candid, but it constitutes one of his greatest teachings.

While it helpful to notice how Fred does what he does, it is also helpful to notice what he does not do.

He does not talk down to his listeners. He assumes from the start that we are capable of attending to the text, handling some scholarship, dealing with open-ended stories, and drawing our own conclusions. He does not tell us what he is going to tell us, tell us, and then tell us what he told us. He sits down before we are ready. He lets us chew our own food.

He does not make use of caricatures or stereotypes. When he has an argument to make, he does not set up a cardboard opponent. Whether the adversary of a story is a Pharisee or a church member who thinks the parable of the Prodigal Son needs fixing, Fred goes to some trouble to present the other person's point of view. In this way he both honors and engages the complexity of most arguments worth having.

He does not turn to popular culture for material. His stories come from real life, not the movies. He may cite Shakespeare or the evening news but there is not a single reference in this volume to a sports event or television show. Of course this may simply reflect Fred's tastes, but I think it is more than that. The sources a preacher consults suggest to listeners where God may be found. Fred's sources point to the full range of human experience that is available even to those without cable connections.

But do not let me hold you up another minute. It is time for you to begin, so that you can engage this master preacher—this consummate human being—in his own words. Somewhere in these pages he says that gratitude is the central virtue of Christian life. If that is true, then he has made virtuous people of us all.

Barbara Brown Taylor



## Introduction

The editors of this volume offered me the opportunity to write an introduction to this collection and I jumped at the chance. I need to talk to the reader about these sermons whether or not the reader needs it. Every preacher, whether published or not, needs now and then to back away and bring to the conscious level what she is doing. Because repetition is a major component of the preparation and delivery of sermons, habits develop, and that is not a bad thing. Habit is a best friend of the preacher, but habit can contribute to a degree of deafness and blindness, which can dull the edge of communication.

The first thing I want to say is that these sermons were prepared to be heard not read. They were from the time of conception aimed for the ear not the eye. For there to be a collection the first task was to locate recordings of sermons delivered, transcribe them, edit as needed, and then to present them to you to be read. Your task would be far easier if you were reading writing but, in fact, you are reading speaking. Of these fifty-five messages, only one existed as a manuscript to be read before it was delivered from a pulpit. (I expect the readers will have little difficulty identifying which one it is.)

For most of my years in the pulpits of chapels and churches, my preaching has been attempts to implement the definition of a sermon as an event in the world of sound. Hearing is a world away from reading. A sermon is heard while seated among other listeners; one most often reads alone. A sermon is heard in a context of worship; one may read a sermon at home, on a plane, or in a library. Listeners to sermons often have a relationship of mutual respect and trust with the preacher; readers of sermons often do not know, have never met, the writer. A preacher may trust a familiar audience with a half-sentence, knowing they will complete it; may pause in silence; may gesture with a hand, a shrug of the shoulders, a look of disgust or doubt or bewilderment. A preacher may make wordless noises—grunts, groans, sighs, chuckles. A writer, even a good one, can barely approach conveying such nuances. A preacher and a writer can both use repetition, but for the preacher the range of communicating meanings and emotion is far greater. Repeating words or phrases, when speaking, may slow down a message so the listener can catch up, or may underscore, or transition, or question, or even contradict. Such is a voice in the room; only partially so is the word on a page.

Enough of this: my intent is not to create a competition but rather to point to a difference. I am aware that, unlike the manuscript, orality can tempt the preacher into a casualness that approaches sloppiness. "I enjoy just conversing with the congregation," said the preacher as an excuse for poor preparation, lack of focus, sparse content. Preaching *is* conversation but it is serious conversation; two persons (or a preacher and congregation) with enough in common to be able to communicate, with enough difference to need to communicate, and each with an open willingness to be influenced by the other.

Obviously, the differences between the spoken and the written word are sufficient to call for editing when moving from one to the other, in this case from the voice to the page. The ideal is to produce a script which reads well but which prompts the reader to say, "As I read I could hear the sermon being preached." Such editing is difficult and only partially approaches the ideal. The temptation is to provide the reader with explanations, descriptions, and footnotes to ease the transition. One could argue for the benefit of such aids, but losses are greater. It is better to turn the sermon loose, to let the reader deal with it without the preacher, to make discoveries even beyond the intention of the preacher, and to find that surplus of meaning lurking in every good sermon as in every biblical text. In other words, trust the reader as the preacher trusts the listener.

Having said this, perhaps it would not be too intrusive on the reader for me to comment in general on my sense of what constitutes effective preaching. I will attempt to organize my thoughts by pointing out the major influences on my preaching life.

I must speak first of the Scriptures, and I will do so in two ways: the study of biblical texts and the texts themselves. Exegesis of texts begins in a sense of distance between oneself and the text. This distance is to be respected, and even enjoyed as one enjoys listening in on a conversation. The exegete does not become impatient and collapse the distance too soon. Rushing from *then* to *now* interferes with honest listening. The sermon that is in a hurry to speak to us today can be heard as lacking confidence in the Scripture's capacity to gain and hold attention and robs the sermon of anticipation by a lack of restraint or an unwillingness to delay in arriving at the point. As in much of life, anticipation is a major source of pleasure as well as a precondition of learning.

And as we all know, exegesis is by its nature inductive. That is to say, one works with the details of the text under consideration and out of those details comes the message. This is the opposite of the deductive sermon, which moves from a general theme to the particulars of application and exhortation. This difference between induction and deduction was in my early pulpit years a source of constant agony. I knew that honest exegesis dealt with the details interior to the text, out of which I arrived at a conclusion as to the meaning

to be preached. This induction I did in my study, in private, but then I went into the pulpit with my theme or conclusion and started with that, breaking it down into particular points as I went along. No wonder I was uncomfortable in the pulpit; my listeners had to accept my point without participating in the process of arriving at it. Relief from that pain came when I began doing my exegesis in the pulpit in the company of those who had as large a stake in the message of the text as I did.

But the biblical text gives me much more than a method or movement of thought, a way of unrolling the sermon. The text gives my sermons rich vocabulary and phrasing, words concrete and particular, words that appeal to the five senses, giving the listener something to touch, to see, to taste, to hear, to smell. Very seldom does the Bible deal in abstracts such as morality or mortality or spirituality. In addition, the text gives my sermons a population. A sermon consisting only of ideas, regardless of their truth or merit, is unreal. No one lives in such a world, and as long as our sermons are related to Scripture we will be reminded to include the names of actual persons. The Scriptures, by naming the sister of Moses, the husband of Naomi, the parents of John the Baptist, the Roman soldier who guarded Paul, and the brother of Jesus, instruct us not only to tell its stories as stories of real people but also to bear witness to the lives of those about us. I often review my sermons listening for names and places and specific events. The more specific, the more applicable to more listeners.

Finally, the Scriptures remind me that lively and engaging preaching contains conversation. Relating a message in the form of conversation is not a homiletical gimmick; it is the way the biblical texts tell their stories. Adam said, Eve said, Noah said, Sarah said, Moses said, Elijah said, Amos said, Mary said, the angel said, the demon said, Jesus said, Paul said, Peter said, James said: so the stories are told. The Scriptures are so bold as to say, "God said." How much more engaging is a conversation than a report or an explanation. Conversations hold the camera on what is being said. Conversations make the absent present. The preacher who studies the sacred text and then converts it into summaries, explanations, and syllogisms has robbed the text of much of its power.

All this is to say that biblical preaching means much more than using Scripture to give authority to the sermon. And it means more than informing the listeners. There is informing, to be sure, but the informing is most effective when it comes as reminders. "You remember when Jesus, on his way to Galilee, stopped at a well to get a drink of water?" Then the preacher tells the story completely because many listeners do not remember. Since some do and some do not remember, the formula for narrating biblical material is this: tell it as a reminder as though all know it; tell it completely as though none know

it. In the course of time there will be enough Scripture in the congregation's memory bank that the preacher can make allusions to texts and receive from the listeners a nod of recognition. What a delightful moment that is!

I am talking to you about major influences on my preaching and I began with the major influence, the Scriptures. I have, for purposes of discussion, separated out as a second influence that which is in fact a portion of Scripture: the parables of Jesus. I have done so because the parables have functioned for me as a way of communicating apart from their status as biblical and therefore normative texts. Parables are metaphorical and therefore expect an interpretive contribution from the listener. The parable gives freedom of interpretation, and therefore responsibility of interpretation to the hearer. Congregations long accustomed to being told what everything means will likely have lazy ears and will resist this offer of responsible listening. But in the course of time they will come to accept it as their delightful duty. After all, the Scriptures belong to the whole church, not to the clergy alone, to be dispensed in such doses as the clergy deem appropriate.

Let me be clear: parabolic preaching is not a game one plays with the congregation. "I bet you can't get this one." The subject is serious: the reign of God, and the sermon is an invitation to participate in mind, heart, and action. Underscore "invitation." No one wants to listen to pulpit bullies, behaving as though they had walked all around God and taken pictures. Not only listeners, but preachers, too, stand before a double mystery: the mystery of God and the mystery of the human longing for God. Preaching that is aware of this does not seek to coerce but, as C. H. Dodd said of the parable, to "tease the mind into active thought."

I must mention but not discuss too lengthily the influence of Søren Kierkegaard on my preaching. A chance encounter with Hermann Diem on a street in Tübingen, Germany, in the summer of 1969 began my relationship with Søren Kierkegaard. I expressed to Professor Diem my frustrated search for a way of preaching in a time when the authority of the pulpit could no longer be assumed. Professor Diem turned to leave, paused, and said over his shoulder, "Read Kierkegaard." I did, and the immediate result was the Beecher Lectures at Yale published under the title *Overhearing the Gospel*. I need not repeat what is said there, but if anyone wishes to engage Søren Kierkegaard's method of indirect discourse, I suggest his *The Point of View of My Work as an Author*. His indirect method of communicating led me to narrative in general and in particular to the parables of Jesus, which took on new significance in my search for a way to preach.

I turn now to a final resource influential in the development of my preaching style. I say "final" fully aware of many influences along the way, which may actually be more important because they lie beneath the surface of conscious

recovery. But, the “final” influence is Thomas de Quincey, a mid-nineteenth-century English essayist. His brief essay *Literature of Knowledge and Literature of Power* is worthy of every preacher’s careful reading. De Quincey distinguishes between literature with the purpose of imparting knowledge and literature with the purpose of creating an experience in the reader; the one *informs*, the other *forms*. As an example of the former he offers the cookbook; as an example of the latter he offers John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. It is no difficult matter to bring to bear on preaching the insights of de Quincey. Some sermons have as a primary purpose the instruction of the listener, and so are framed to be remembered. Other sermons are intended to create in the listener a new experience and so are framed not so much to be remembered as to be life altering, to be what Stanley Fish calls “self-consuming artifact.” To be sure, many sermons in some measure pursue both purposes, but it is helpful for the preacher to ask in each case, “What am I really trying to do?” De Quincey has served me well in my continuing quest to find a more effective way to preach. I say “continuing” because it is, and it will be until the pulpit is vacated and the book closed.

Fred B. Craddock  
Cherry Log, Georgia

# Sermons

## Only One God but Just in Case

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*Genesis 31:17–32*

It's good to see you again this morning. When I looked out and saw the darkened sky this morning I thought, "Who would show up in this dreadful weather?" So I sat there in my room and made a list of the good and faithful people who are abounding in steadfast love. I looked over the crowd and you are exactly the ones I listed. It's amazing. I appreciate also the many solicitations concerning my health and whether the chores here are a bit much for me. They are not. This is Thursday; I have begun to accumulate a little weariness but it's all right. I'm back to my usual routine as a six-mile runner. I don't run it every day and I don't run it all at once. The six miles are the total I have accumulated over eleven years.

I hope the discussion of these biblical characters has been in some way helpful to you at the point of some identification or clarification. I have wanted to be clear in speaking to you, but I have not wanted to simplify their lives in terms of unusual good or unusual flaws in their faith. But to maintain the complexity and tension of it, I have tried to talk to you as adults, I suppose. I have been offended in recent years by the use of the word *adult* and what constitutes adult entertainment. It's really insulting to adults; violence and bloodshed and crashing and bombing, nudity, profanity, and that's adult. There is nothing they offer really that I haven't heard or seen or read on the walls of public toilets since I was six years old.

I'm talking about adult in the sense that it was used early in the movie industry. I remember the first adult western. It was called *High Noon* with Grace Kelly and Gary Cooper. It was advertised as an adult western. There was no nudity, no profanity, and a minimum of shooting guns. What made it adult? A Quaker woman marries a police officer, a marshal. He is sworn to protect the town; she is sworn to pacifism and nonviolence. In their marriage,

he commits himself to her and will take off his gun. In the marriage, she commits herself to him and will support and care for him. The rogues, the thugs, the villains that he has sent to prison return to town on the wedding day. They both have conflicting commitments, to peace, to each other, to protect the town. It was called adult. That is adult. Everything is not neat and simple and clear. Decisions have to be made and pains borne and sorrows expressed.

We come today to the beautiful Rachel; beautiful of name, Rachel, beautiful of face, Rachel. She has captured the heart of Judaism from the beginning. She has captured the heart of the church and Christianity. She was like Sarah, barren most of her married life. She was like Hannah, barren most of her married life. But it is Rachel that has captured the hearts of so many people. When Jeremiah is expressing in great lamentation the desolate condition of Israel, he says, “I heard a voice in Ramah, the voice of Rachel, crying for her children and she would not be consoled because they were gone” (Jer. 31:15, au. trans.).

When Matthew told the story of the infancy of Jesus and the wicked king trying to destroy Jesus by killing the boy babies in the Bethlehem area, Matthew says, “I heard a voice in Ramah, the voice of Rachel weeping, weeping for her children, and she would not be consoled because they were gone” (Matt. 2:18, au. trans.). Rachel. Of the many sons of Jacob, the twelve tribes of Israel, really Rachel bore only two sons. First there was Joseph, who later was to save the whole family from famine because of his position in Egypt, and then the beloved Benjamin. She died in childbirth when Benjamin came and she named him Ben-Oni, Son of My Sorrow. But when she died, Jacob renamed him Benjamin, Son of My Right Hand. She’s buried near Bethlehem and some of you have visited the historic marker said to be the place of her tomb near Bethlehem. She is like Mozart, Amadeus, beloved of God.

I was just reviewing before coming here some of the literary figures who have loved her and spoken of her in symbolic ways as well as theological ways. Charles Lamb, Herman Melville, William Makepeace Thackeray, T. S. Eliot, Charles Dickens, they have loved her and she has appeared in their poems and their stories. But in the text that was read a few moments ago, Rachel is in a point of transition, a radical dislocation. When Isaac knew that there wasn’t room in the land for his warring sons, Jacob and Esau, he said to Jacob, “I don’t want you to marry one of the Palestinian women. I want you to leave. I want you to go to the East Country. Your mother has relatives there; I want you to marry among those people.” So he went far to the east and he met Rachel, daughter of Laban.

Jacob said, “Laban, I will work for you seven years for her,” and he did. The day of the wedding, here came Leah. Jacob said, “I said Rachel.”

“Well, Leah is older and in our country, the older girl marries first.”



Jacob worked seven more years, fourteen years for this woman. Now that is extraordinary. I mean, Jacob was shrewd, but right now it looks like he doesn't have the brightest porch light on the block. Fourteen years! But he did, he loved her. They were married and they stayed on six more years with Laban before the time came to leave. Jacob said, "It is time for us to go, to go back to the land of my people, land of my father, land of my inheritance. It is time to go back to the land of my God."

She agreed. "Your God is my God. Your land is my land. Your family is my family." And so begins for her a time of radical dislocation. She had, even after her marriage, not only her years growing up in the home, but even after her marriage, lived in her father's house for six years. It was home and she had such a strong, protecting father who loved his daughters and cared for them in every possible way. Everything was so secure. And now, move. Moving is, on the stress list, number two, right after funerals. It's painful; it's difficult because furniture and houses that we get used to mother us. Just to come in and take off your jacket or your coat or toss your purse in a chair, kick off the shoes, this is home.

Once, somewhere in North Carolina, I was housed by the Ministerial Association in a local retirement center. I didn't get the point of it but that's where I was quartered. I was told when I went there and took my room, "Now in the morning when you come down for breakfast, you wait until everybody is seated before you take a seat. Everybody always sits in the same place. Don't upset it." Don't move the furniture in the home of an elderly person. Don't create any upsetting circumstance. Because, you see, routine has a composing quality to it. You know routine has been underrated. Routine is extremely important.

The father/husband dies, the mother/widow there, children there, the grandchildren there, the funeral is over. You see the mother/widow at the sink washing. "Mother, don't do the dishes, we'll take care of the dishes." You see mother slip down to the corner grocery to get a quart of milk. "Mother, send one of the boys down there to get the milk." You see mother scraping out table scraps for the dog. "Mother, the boys will feed the dog. Sit down, Mother." You see mother a little later fixing supper for the folks who are there. "Mother, we'll take care of it." Leave her alone; she's trying to stay alive.

And Rachel moves. She has to go a journey of weeks and weeks and weeks in the tent, going with the animals and the children and the servants and all, back westward to the land and the God and the faith of her husband. You can call it a pilgrimage if you want to and on good religious days that's a nice way to say it. "She was on a pilgrimage." But you know what pilgrimage is, don't you? It means transient; it means temporary; it means paper plates and Dixie cups. It means a bunch of children asking, "Are we there yet?" It means asking

your husband, “Is this it?” Pilgrimage sounds nice but what that means is very temporary.

I remember hearing Joachim Jeremias of Germany telling of the time when he was in Israel and invited by some friends to help them or join them at least in observing the Feast of Tents. They had erected a little brush arbor in the backyard to help them remember the days in the tents in the wilderness. He said, “When I went into this little hovel they had built, on one side of the doorway was a slip of paper attached that said, ‘From God.’ On the other side of the doorway was another little slip of paper that said, ‘To God.’” And in between, tent.

Now we know, all of us know in our heads that it is true, that all of us are just moving along. Everything is temporary but we don’t like all these extra reminders. We have enough already—the seasons. In the spring, when the world is a poem of light and color and the meadows are turning somersaults of joy, it doesn’t last long. It gets hot, heat waves come up off the highway and the railroad tracks and somebody’s fumbling with the thermostat and everybody’s trying to stay cool, but it doesn’t last long. Comes a little chill in the air, the autumn weather turns the leaves to flame, somebody kicks a football and a whistle blows and a school bell rings, but not for long. Pretty soon the bony fingers of the trees will pray to heaven for some cover and down comes the snow to blanket them. The flying cloud and the frosty light and the year’s dying in the night and somebody says, “Happy New Year.” Just like that. We have enough reminders. Even our own bodies: look at yourself in the mirror.

A small boy can hop up on a rail fence and balance himself for half a mile. But in a few years he’ll walk around in his front yard as though it were a foreign country. A child can hear a cricket in the grass. In a few years she’ll walk in front of a honking automobile and swear she never heard a sound. A boy can see the quail in the brush but in a few years look upon the face of his closest friend and say, “I didn’t catch the name.” That’s just the way it is. We don’t need more reminders.

Every day with Rachel, temporary, moving, moving, moving, moving, the loss of place. What a tragic thing. You know place is important to everybody. Whatever you may think about it, it is extremely important. If you’ve been involved with Habitat for Humanity and had the additional pleasure of being there when the family comes, you know. The house is complete, here’s this young mother, three children, and they’re holding to her skirt. One will dart off in this room and dart back, “Mama, Mama, there’s a bathroom, there’s a nice bathroom.” One will dart off this way, “Mama, there’s a bedroom and there’s another one. Can I have my own? Is this our home? Is this our place?” “Yes, this is our place.” That’s it.

“Now, Mother, now that Dad has died and you’re alone, you’re going to have to come and live with me. I can’t stand being there in Albuquerque thinking of you here by yourself. I don’t know what might happen so you’re going to come. I’m going to stay over a few extra days for you to pack your things. Maybe we’ll get rid of a few things you don’t need and you’re going to come with me.”

“I’m not coming to live with you.”

“Mother, you’ll have your own little place to the side. You’ll have your own kitchen, your bathroom. You can have your own television. We won’t interfere.”

“I’m not coming.”

“Mother, I can’t stand . . . now you’re coming.”

“I am *not* coming. I have my friends; I have my neighbors; I have my place; I have my church. Leave me alone.”

It’s true even of young people. If you have a son or a daughter away at university, and after a few weeks there, the home phone rings, “What are you guys doing?”

“Oh, nothing much, just sitting here watching a little T.V. What are you doing?”

“Oh, I thought I’d come home this weekend and see how you all are doing.”

“Well, okay, if you want to, but it’s a long way.”

“It’s not bad, I’ll get in late Friday night.”

“You think that old car will make it?”

“Oh, it will make it fine. I’ll be in there Friday night.”

“Don’t you need to study?”

“I’ll bring some books with me. I just want to check up and see how you all are doing.”

Come in late Friday night and go up to bed. Come down next morning. “Same old bedspread, same old curtains, I thought maybe you’d change things.” Been gone a month, you know. Come down to the kitchen, eat breakfast. Same old refrigerator. “Dad, why don’t you get Mom a new refrigerator? This one is getting all worn around the handle and everything.” Same old refrigerator. Goes out, looks around, same old town.

Sunday morning, “Get up, we’re going to church.”

“Aw, can’t I sleep?”

“No, you knew we go to church when you came home. Now get up.”

Go to church, come back. “Same old sermon; I knew in three minutes everything he was going to say. Same old songs, same old prayers.” Sit down to the pot roast; same old pot roast. Dad has the blessing. “Bless this food to our body’s use and us to thy service.”

“Same old blessing, eh, Dad?” Sunday afternoon, “Well it’s time to go back.” Now, why did he come home? Because it’s the same ol’, it’s the same ol’. It’s tough at school; it’s competitive. I don’t mean just in the classroom but in every way. People have values or no values, ideas and notions and classroom teachers that are strange and all that. It’s just tough. So when they call on some Friday and say, “I just thought I’d check up on you and see how you’re doing,” say, “Okay, we’d be glad to see you.” Just have to have a place.

But Rachel has no place now. Oh, she has a place way down the road and she says as surely and as firmly as anyone, “There is no God but my husband’s God, the God of Israel.” But before she leaves, she steals the family gods, puts them in the saddlebags of her camel, just in case. These have been the little gods on the altar, little candle on either side, and these little gods, they brought the rain, they caused the cows and the lambs to come. They caused the children to be healthy; they caused happy marriages. These were her household gods all of her life.

Oh, there’s only one true God, the God of . . . but just in case, a little backup, you see, just a little backup. Do you find that is really the way it is? Just a little backup. Most of us need some backup. How many people have come to this country from other countries, put their children in schools, pretty soon they’re going to a church, and pretty soon they become Christian. They didn’t grow up Christian; they were in another religion in another country. Now they’re in America; now they’re citizens, they’re belonging to a church. You go into their home; they show you the home, “Isn’t this nice?” And upstairs in the hall is a little table with two little candles and something in between. “I know, I know this doesn’t fit in. We’re Christian and all, but all my life. . . .” A little backup.

Paul ran into it in his churches. In the church in Colossae, they believed in Jesus Christ, they’d been baptized, they were worshiping together, but they got into this angel business. Oh, they loved those angels. They said, “Oh yes, we believe in Christ and Christ died for our sins and Christ was raised and we can say the creed with the best of them, but these angels, you know they never die. They can come in and help you. Christ is fine but when you’re in a crisis, you know, a little angel won’t hurt.” They had a little backup and Paul said, “If Christ is not sufficient, forget it. Forget this angel stuff on the side as backup.”

In the church at Corinth, they believed in Christ, they recited the creed; they believed what Paul preached. They had become members of the church but they still wanted a little backup. And when Paul wasn’t there, all these high-powered preachers came, standing tall. They thumped their suspenders and did wondrous things and people said they could heal and they could work miracles. There was a big crowd and pretty soon they were saying, “You know

Paul was all right. He wasn't too attractive; he wasn't really a good speaker and he was all beat up from the stuff he's been through. We like these new ones; they've got the power. Oh, the Gospel is fine and the Bible is fine but we want some miracles just, you know, as backup."

And Paul said, "You want backup? I'll give you backup. I have been whipped five times for my faith. I have been beaten with rods three times for my faith. I have been shipwrecked; I have spent twenty-four hours in the water. I have been wet and cold and hungry, chased in the city, chased in the country, alone and stoned and left for dead. Are you getting the picture, folks? Is that not enough? Do you still need some backup?"

One of the brightest seminarians I had left school. He said, "I believe the Gospel and I believe in God and I believe in Christ and I believe what the church teaches. I want to be a minister but I want something more." He went to California; it was in the days of psychedelic music and psychedelic lights and psychedelic drugs. He became brain damaged, ending what could have been a fruitful life.

I said to him once, "What was that experience like?"

He said, "Well, well, well, it was, it was . . . everything was just, everything was kind of orange."

What did he want? He wanted a little more than what the Gospel provided.

I had a Bible class, in a way it was a Bible class, for a group of women who were forming on a Tuesday, I think it was, Bible study in Atlanta. They told me one day, "We'll have to leave early today because this is the day we go out to Lake Lanier."

And I said, "Lake Lanier? You go to Lake Lanier?"

They said, "Yes, this is the day we go to Lake Lanier."

I said, "Why?"

"Well, we go out there and we get on this nice boat that one of the husbands owns. We reach over and get some water from the lake and we all put our hands in the water and get in touch with the primal source and try to remember when we were here before."

Well, I mean these are all committed churchwomen. They're in the choir and all that. Plus, plus, a little backup.

In Jerusalem, there is by the sheep gate, a pool called in Hebrew, *Bethzatha*; it has five porches. At that pool there's a legend that every once in a while an angel will come down and stir the water and the first one that gets in is healed. All the believing, God-believing people bring their sick folk and lay them by the pool just in case today an angel will stir the water. Oh, they're still in the synagogue, they're saying the Eighteen Benedictions and they're having the prayers and giving the alms for the poor, but still, there's a little more. Now some people quit the synagogue and some people quit

the church. I've known in every town, people who quit their church and say, "Well, we go to the pool now."

"We've been missing you in Sunday school."

"Well, you see, we're going to the pool now."

"Well, what's going on down at the pool?"

"The first one who gets in when the water is stirred is healed."

Hey, back up! Now who gets in first? Severely crippled, twisted, arthritic, in pain people? Oh no, no, no. The people who are able to get in first, somebody with chapped lips or a hangnail. What a commentary on the kind of stuff people pursue. And it's my experience that most of the people who are pursuing that backup are doing quite well in the world, thank you.

One day, one day, the disciples could understand it no more. Jesus was talking about leaving and he said to them, "Farewell; in a little while you won't see me."

They couldn't stand it so finally Philip, speaking for the group, said, "Show us God and we'll be satisfied. Just show us God."

And Jesus said, "Oh, you want to see God." And a child, epileptic, falling in the fire, falling in the water, worrying his parents to death, is brought to Jesus and Jesus hugs him and touches him and heals him.

The disciples said, "Well, yes, that's nice and all, but we want to see God." And a leper comes and Jesus reaches out and touches the leper and heals him. The disciples said, "But we want to see God. We want to see God."

And Jesus said, "Oh, you want to see God."

So some young mothers come with their little babies. They're crying and the mothers are sticking the pacifiers in their mouths. They have to change a diaper and it's a little disturbing and noisy and the twelve apostles come in and say, "Get the kids out of here; we're trying to have the kingdom."

Jesus said, "Let the children come to me. Don't you stop the children, for of such is the kingdom of God."

"But we want to see God."

He said, "Oh, you want to see God."

They said, "Yes."

So he took a towel and a basin of water and he washed their feet. They cried, "Oh no, don't, don't, no, we want to see God."

He said, "Oh, you want to see God." And so he picked up a cross, started up the hill, turned around and looked at every one of us and said, "Have I been with you all this time and you don't know that whoever has seen me has seen God?"

Is this enough? Or do you need a little backup?

## Back to Basics

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### *Exodus 20:1–17*

You've heard it now twice, once from Richard in the Call to Worship and once from John in the Scripture reading that there are ten, and not eleven, Commandments. I hope those in this church who have been insisting that there are eleven will knock it off; there are ten. The eleventh one is spurious, does not exist, is not in the Bible. "Thou shall barely get by" is not one of the commandments.

We hear a lot about the Ten Commandments now, and have for several years, whether or not it is possible, or right, or legal to post them in courthouses and legislatures, in the classrooms of public schools. Some who advocate this are simply, I think, testing the principle of separation of church and state, but some are sincere people concerned about the sagging morals of the country and feel that the posting of the Ten Commandments might bolster morality a bit. Commit no act of violence, don't lie, don't steal, don't commit adultery, don't covet in a greedy way what belongs to other people. Perhaps it would help. There are those who wish to use the Ten Commandments as perhaps a way of scotching the decline and the decay of the American family. Honor your father and mother who brought you into the world and loved you and made you safe. It might help.

There are some who simply, plainly put, wish to bring the country back to God. "I am the LORD your God . . . you shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:2–3). You're not to turn me into a trinket or an idol or something you can put on a bumper sticker or put around your neck, or post on a board, or make into a cute saying. I'm more than that. I am the Lord your God. It might help. Do not take the name of God lightly. Don't be heard saying "My God" and "Good God" and all like that and then excuse it by saying, "I didn't

mean anything by it.” When you use the name of God, mean something by it. It might help.

I thought a lot about the Ten Commandments recently. In a restaurant in Blue Ridge I ran into an old classmate of mine and I thought of the Ten Commandments. I’ll tell you why. I hardly recognized him. He’s not only gotten old, I don’t know what’s the matter with him, but he still had egg on his face. We were in a class together, taught by a Jewish rabbi, on Jesus and Judaism. It was a good class, about twenty of us, and he was, I guess you would say, the class clown. It’s nice to have a clown in class, it breaks it up. But once in a while the clown gets into trouble and it’s hard for a clown to get out of trouble because everything that’s said digs it a little deeper. The rabbi, our teacher, was talking about the Ten Commandments and our class clown, with whom I visited in the restaurant in Blue Ridge, said, “Well, Prof., if God had written on both sides of the tablet, he could have gotten it all on one tablet, making it easier for Moses to carry down the mountain.”

We all waited; how’s the rabbi going to take that? I mean, the rabbi even looked like God. And the rabbi said, “If you would read your text that we had for today, Exodus 32, you would know that God wrote on the front and on the back.” I was ready to drop it. I was ten or twelve feet away, but you know, those things can ricochet. But the clown wouldn’t leave it alone. He said, “Well, if God had written in smaller print, he could have gotten all ten on one tablet and wouldn’t have had to use two; would have been easier for Moses.” And he looked around at us to see if he had any support. He had none.

And the rabbi said, “God did get all ten of them on one tablet. Both tablets had all Ten Commandments.” Jaws dropped. I didn’t know that. The clown didn’t know that, but he hated to lose. So he said, “Then if they were both the same, why two copies? Oh, one for the file; I see.” Didn’t work.

The rabbi said, “They were both for the file. They were both kept in a beautiful wooden box, overlaid with gold, with gold cherubim above the box facing each other, and everywhere that Israel went they carried these tablets because these were the Tablets of the Covenant, ten on one, ten on the other. One was for the people and one was for God and they carried them with them to remind them to remember, remember God.” Tough assignment. Oh, on a clear day, on a real clear day like today, I can remember God, but usually you have to work at it.

“I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. I want you to remember that. Your life was nothing, you were nobody, you weren’t citizens, you had no name, you had no address, you were strangers and aliens in a foreign land. You were slaves; you worked and broke your back to fill the pockets of other people. You were living, but only partly living and I gave you freedom. I want you to remember that.”



I've thought about that a lot of times. Wouldn't it have been better if they'd just forgotten it? Just forget it; I've said that to folk who still carry the burden of the Depression with them. They were born during the Depression, the gnawing poverty, the homelessness, the same old plain food or no food at all. I've said "forget it" to people who grew up in families where alcohol had broken every dish in the house. Grown up peeking from behind the couch. Violence, anger, cursing, swearing, finally dissolution. "Forget it, move on." I've said that to people who've had nice homes, three cars, in fact everything they wanted, except the one thing they wanted most: love. "Forget it, move on."

And God said, "Don't forget it. That has shaped you to be what you are. You can't forget it. The tides of a thousand oceans could sweep ashore and roll over the sand of your mind, but when the tide went out, you would still remember. That's who you are."

A halfway house near Plainview, Texas, I think it is. A place where prisoners, hardened prisoners, have served most of their time in the state system of Texas, and are now moving toward rejoining society. These are still tough customers with all the dissipation of crime and misuse on their bodies, getting ready to go out. They had a Sunday school class in First Christian Church in Plainview. I taught the class twice. It was a tough bunch. They said it straight, no tiptoeing around and filling the air with righteousness and stewardship and going forth unto victories. No, they just called it like it was. Kind of scared me but I never in the two Sundays I was with them, I never heard any of them blame anybody else. "I am a convicted felon. That's who I am."

Nettie and I and the kids lived in Enid, Oklahoma. I worked with Alcoholics Anonymous. I wasn't an alcoholic but they were nice to me. In fact, the week before we left to move to Georgia, I was the honored guest at AA. They had a sheet cake there wishing me farewell, and underneath it, "For Fred, our honorary drunk." I liked that title but I never, never heard any of them say, "I used to be alcoholic but I've forgotten all that." They say, "I am an alcoholic."

God said, "Remember you are liberated slaves. And I want you to remember it because when you're in a land of your own, there will be strangers come, people that you can take advantage of because they don't know the language, they don't have a home, they don't have an education. Oh, you can work them for nothing practically, you can really take . . . No! When a stranger comes among you, remember you were a stranger in Egypt."

But wouldn't remembering, wouldn't remembering keep alive a kind of hatred among us for the Egyptians? They enslaved us, they hurt us, they took away our lives. Won't that just keep alive a kind of prejudice against the Egyptians? And God said, "No."

You see, when God delivered Israel from Egypt, God was busy at the time and gave the assignment to a group of angels to take care of it. And when the

fleeing Israelites got to the Red Sea, these angels empowered of God parted the water. The Israelites went through on dry land and then when the pursuing Egyptians got there with horses and chariots, and fire in their faces, when they got in the middle of the Red Sea, the angels released the water. And horses and chariots and men went tumbling, drowning, tumbling, drowning. The angels said, "We got 'em, we got 'em, we got 'em."

And God came along and God said, "What are you cheering about?" They said, "Look, we got 'em." And God said, "You're dismissed from my service. I can use you no more." "Why? We got 'em."

"You don't understand. The Egyptians are also my children. And I want you to remember that I am the one who gave you food, bread from heaven, and water for the journey. All the way through the wilderness to the promised land, I fed you. I gave you birth, I nurtured you, I nursed you, I gave you love, I gave you safety. Don't forget. I gave you water from a rock, I gave you manna from heaven. I fed you every day. Don't forget. The time will come," God said, "you'll be in the land, you'll have a nice home."

"Sure thing; we put up a nice place there; our summer place. Half-million dollars; real nice."

"Oh, there'll be a time when you don't need to drink from the streams anymore because you'll say we have our own well now, we have our own well. We provide for ourselves; we don't have to raise any food, we go to the market. And you will have the illusion that you're sufficient to yourself. So I want you to do this. One week every year, I don't care how nice your home, how deep your well, you will spread a tent in the backyard and live in the tent for a week. To remember, to remember. Secondly, one day out of every seven, you will give to me. You're not to work. One out of every seven belongs to me. It is a God day. It's a remember God day. Get rid of the frantic, always on the cell phone, always on the e-mail, always on the wheel, always on the go."

"If we drive all night, we'll get to the beach by sunrise and we'll have two full hours before we have to go back. Wasn't that a great vacation?" Frantic leisure, frantic work. "But if I don't work on Sunday, if I don't work on the Sabbath, somebody may get ahead of me. Somebody else may get the deal. Somebody else may make the sale."

"True, true, but if you don't, if you forget, what difference does it make? What difference does it make? And I want you to do this. When you put the bread and drink on the table, I want you to say grace. 'Blessed art thou, O Lord, Creator of the Universe, you care for all your creatures and fill our hearts with good things. Amen.' 'For health and strength and daily food, we give you thanks, O Lord.' 'Bless this food to our body's use and us to thy service. Amen.' 'God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food.' Every day, every day."

The class clown couldn't leave it alone, had one more question. "Yes?" "I still don't understand why God had a tablet. I understand we need a tablet but why would God need a tablet?" And still with complete patience, the rabbi said, "To remind God to remember us. The oldest prayer in the world is, 'Please God, don't forget us.' Think about it. 'Remember me, the one who inhabits eternity, who dances among the stars.'"

Think about it. Knows where Cherry Log is, knows where you live, knows the names of your family members, knows where you hurt, why you ache, what makes you happy. God knows when the sparrow falls and God remembers you. So God has a tablet, too. To remember.

Years ago when we were in Germany, I was holding a retreat for chaplains, army chaplains, at Berchesgarten, Germany. I went over to the General Walker Hotel to get my supper and there was a young woman there singing that evening while we had our meal. She was from London; her name was Julie Rayne. She sang while we ate, songs of the '40s and '50s, nice songs from musicals; very nice. And then without a break or without an introduction, right in the middle of the concert, she sang Psalm 121. "I lift mine eyes to the hills from whence comes my help." It was strange and the people were awkwardly quiet. I saw her the next day. I thanked her for the concert. I said, "But would you tell me, why that Psalm 121? It didn't seem really appropriate for your concert."

And she said, "If you knew what my life was like on the streets of London, you'd realize that was the most appropriate song I sang." She spoke briefly about that life; horrible. And I said, "Wouldn't it be best just to forget it?" And she said, "No, no."