

That Which Lasts

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on March 20, 2022
based on Isaiah 55:1-5*

James Sledge tells the following story about growing up in “the country.”

When I was twelve years old, my family moved out old family land that had once been a farm. It had not been farmed in decades, but once we moved out there we were able to put up a fence so we could have horses. And we didn't just have horses, we also had a pair of donkeys named Angelo and Annabelle.

Now, how it was we acquired these donkeys probably qualifies as one of those “It seemed like a good idea at the time,” moments. Somehow my father had found out about an elderly woman who had seven or eight of them. I think she was moving into a retirement home, and so she was trying to find good homes for her pets. We took two.

We tried to ride them a few times, but that was generally a disaster. They either just sat there or they threw you off. And so they were little more than novelties or conversation pieces. They weren't really good for anything. Well, they could bray so loudly that you could hear them for miles. And they were quite good at escaping.

Our horses would occasionally get out, but they would normally just eat the grass on the other side of the fence. The donkeys, on the other hand, would go on excursions. I bet I'm the only kid who got pulled out of school to go home to help catch the donkeys who were trotting down the road, startling drivers.

At some point the novelty wore off and we decided we should get rid of them. We told everybody and anybody that we were giving away donkeys. I think we even put an ad in the paper, but no takers.

At some point, after trying to give them away for years, my parents decided to run a classified ad offering them for sale. They asked something like \$25 a piece for them, but you could get a deal and buy both for \$40.

We had been trying to give them away for years, but they sold on the very first day the ad ran. And we got calls for a week from others interested in buying them. When they found out the donkeys had already been sold, some wanted to know if they'd been picked up yet, offering to pay us more than the advertised price if they could have them. Who would have ever thought there'd be a bidding war for our worthless donkeys.

Most of us have an innate suspicion that if something is free, it's not worth anything. If you don't have to pay something for it, something is wrong. And yet, in our scripture for this morning the prophet shouts,

You who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Now, a little background. These words were originally addressed to Jewish exiles in Babylon, 600 years before Jesus. The Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem and carried its people into exile some fifty years earlier. The Hebrews struggled in that half century to understand what it meant for God's people to be defeated in such a manner. Were Babylon's gods more powerful? Had Yahweh abandoned them? Was this their punishment for not living as God had called them to live?

But now, at the end of their exile, the prophet begins to speak of rescue and restoration. God has not abandoned them, he says. Yahweh is actually more powerful than Babylon.

"Draw near to God who is about to work salvation for Israel," he says, "but first, give up on the investment you've made in Babylon. Yes, Babylon is very uptown, very sheik – you've enjoyed fruits of cosmopolitan life here in the 6th century B.C.E. but while it is glitzy, nothing it offers will last; it won't ultimately satisfy."

The image the prophet uses is that of the Babylonian marketplace. The market bustles as the vendors shout and buyers haggle over the price. The Hebrews love it, but Isaiah knows they make fun of it too, so he throws them a curve ball.

He creates a vendor like they are familiar with but puts God's words in his mouth. This one says, *Ho, look here everyone. You that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.*

Now, we know all about these Babylonian style vendors, hawking their wares. They assail us on our televisions, in the movie theaters, and on our computer screens. "Ho, look here! Look at this! Can't you see how cool or popular or happy this will make you? You can't live without this new giji-gizmo."

And look, there is no end to what they promise. These things will make us happy, maybe even popular; they will keep us from getting old; they will satisfy longings we don't even know we have, and they will assuage all our insecurities.

So, because these words of God sound like a street corner hawker, they ring hollow. He says, "No need for money," and we say, "what's the catch?"

But there is more than a sales pitch here in this text. The pitch is followed up by a question, and it's not, "Why do you turn your nose up at what is free?" No, the question is, "Why do you so often buy that which does not satisfy?" Now THAT changes everything.

Isaiah, speaking for the one who creates our life, asks, "Why do you concern yourself so much with the flash-in-the-pan – that which today is tweetable, and tomorrow will be totally forgettable?"

I would actually put it this way? "Why *don't* you concern yourself with that which lasts? Why indeed?"

Does that make you think? I hope so.

An often repeated TV commercial today goes this way, "Do you think any of us will look back on our lives and regret the things we didn't buy ... or the places we didn't go."

Right? Very effective.

What's your relationship like with your possessions?

I was reading an old interview with the late actor, Gregory Peck recently. He spoke of the fact that late in his life he and his wife Veronique, packed up all their abstract art (they had quite a collection) and they shipped it all off to the L.A. County Museum. All of it.

They decided that what they wanted to keep, what they wanted to hang on their walls, what they wanted to look at everyday, was all representational. They wanted to see pictures of people, and places and objects that meant something to them.

Peck said he had gotten into a place in his life where all he wanted around him were things that had "emotional content." Only that which touched him deeply was of interest to him anymore. Paintings that were merely expensive investments didn't cut it for him anymore.

I get that. There comes a time, if you live long enough, when you come to believe that life is too short for . . . anything less.

Speaking of Gregory Peck, one thing lots of people in quarantine confessed was that they watched a ton of old movies.

One of the best books I've ever read is an autobiography by the wonderful film critic, the late Roger Ebert. Remember Roger, the thumbs up or down, guy on PBS?

Listen to this: in that memoir he confessed that 90% of the films he had to watch (over his 45 year career of reviewing motion pictures) were eminently forgettable. 90% !!

Much of it he thought of as mere trash. They were movies with no magic; movies with no depth. They had little or nothing in them to make them last. Yes, but here is what he had to say about the really good stuff.

What kind of movies do I like the best? If I had to make a generalization, I would say that many of my favorite movies are about Good People. It doesn't matter if the ending is happy or sad. It doesn't matter if the characters win or lose.

The only true ending is death. Any other movie ending is arbitrary. If a movie ends with a kiss, we're supposed to be happy.

But then if a piano falls on the kissing couple, or a taxi mows them down, we're supposed to be sad. What difference does it make? The best movies aren't about what happens to the characters. They're about the examples they set.

Casablanca is about people who do the right thing. The Third Man is about two people who do the right thing, and can never speak to each other as a result.

The secret of The Silence of the Lambs is buried so deeply that you may have to give this some thought, but its secret is that Hannibal Lecter is a Good Person. He is the helpless victim of his unspeakable depravities, yes, but to the limited degree that he can act independently of them, he tries to do the right thing.

And here is a fascinating, more general, kind of reflection Roger Ebert offers us on the history of film. Remember, we're talking about that which lasts.

Compared to the great movie stars of the past, modern actors are handicapped by the fact that their films are shot in color. In the long run, that will rob most of them of the immortality that was obtained even by second-tier stars of the black-and-white era. Peter Lorre and Sydney Greenstreet are, and will remain, more memorable than most of today's superstars with their multi-million dollar paychecks.

Color is sometimes too realistic and distracting. It projects superfluous emotional cues. It reduces actors to inhabitants of the mere world. Black-and-white (or, more accurately, silver and white) creates a mysterious dream state, a world of form and gesture.

Most people do not agree with me. They like color, and think black-and-white film is missing something.

Try this. If you have wedding photographs of your parents and grandparents, chances are your parents are in color and your grandparents are in black-and-white.

Put the two photographs side by side and consider them honestly. Your grandparents look timeless. Your parents look goofy. (p. 157-159)

Now, think of your own photos – how do you think you will be remembered by those who will see pictures of you in 70 years? Or by the world, more generally? It's a worthy question.

It's certainly a question those in the public eye are aware of. Listen to this intimate look at that reality.

In March of 1965, Gov. George Wallace of Alabama sent President Lyndon Johnson a telegram saying he wanted to meet with him to discuss the demonstrations that were happening in Selma over voter registration. Johnson told him to come ahead.

Here is how Richard Goodwin who worked with LBJ, remembered the meeting –

Wallace came to the Oval Office. He's about 5'4" and Johnson was about 6'4". So he leads Wallace in and sits him down on the couch.

Wallace sits down so he's about 3 feet tall now and Johnson, who had been impressed with President Kennedy's rocking chair had one brought in for himself and it made him very tall in relation to anyone on the couch. So he pretty much hovered over the top of Wallace for the whole meeting.

And Johnson's Southern voice always deepened when he was meeting with other Southerners. And he says, "now you agree that the Negro's got the right to vote don't you?"

Wallace says, "Oh, yes Mr. President, there's no point about that. And Johnson says, "Then why don't you let them vote?"

And Wallace says, "Well, you know, now, I don't have the power. That belongs to the county registrars in the state of Alabama."

*And Johnson says, "Why don't you persuade them, George?"
Wallace says, "Well, I don't think I can do that?"*

And Johnson leaned way down and said, "Now don't you [give me any garbage] about your persuasive powers, George. You know, when I get up in the morning, I've got three TV sets lined up one after the other . . . and I had them on this morning, and I saw you when I pressed the button. And you was attacking me, George."

And George said, "I wasn't attacking you Mr. President, I was attacking the whole problem of state's rights."

And Johnson insisted, "You was attacking me, George. And you were so darned persuasive I almost changed my mind."

Well, this goes on for a half hour or more and LBJ finally turns to Wallace and he says, "George, you and I shouldn't be talking about 1965. We should be talking about 1985. We'll both be dead and gone by then."

Now you got a lot of poor people down there in Alabama A lot of people need jobs, a lot of people need a future. You could do a lot for them, George. Your president will help you.

Now, in 20 years, George, what do you want left behind? Do you want a big marble monument that says, 'George Wallace - He Built.' Or do you want a little piece of scrawny pine board lying across that harsh Alabama soil of yours that reads, 'George Wallace - He Hated?'"

So, let me ask you now, *not* how you will be remembered. That's huge, but it may seem far off for most of you. Let me ask rather, what are you giving yourself to these days during this time that challenges all of us; this time when the very future of our nation and world hangs in the balance? What does your life amount to as you're living it in this curious time?

Is what you are giving yourself to giving you joy, or is it just giving you fits?

Are you building anything? I mean, in a small way, are you building anything that will last beyond your life?

Are you investing yourself in other people in a way that their lives may be better because you have lived, or loved them?

It's never too late to reset our lives, our priorities.

Come. You that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. For, why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Why, indeed?

Amen