

Streetsville United Church  
Sunday, March 07, 2010  
Rev. John Tapscott

**"SEEK THE LORD WHILE HE MAY BE FOUND"**

Isaiah 55:6

Do you ever have trouble making choices? Sometimes I do, over small things, too. But some choices are easy to make. We would choose success instead of failure; comfort rather than affliction. We would choose riches rather than poverty; victory instead of defeat. We would choose the attractive over the forbidding. In the Bible I think of how Abraham and his nephew Lot divided up the land God had given to them. Looking out from a hilltop they surveyed the land and Abraham gave the younger man the first choice. Not surprisingly, Lot chose the lush green land of the Jordan plain, leaving the rugged wilderness land for Abraham. But Lot's choice was not for the best.

Now many things are not a matter of our choosing; they just come to us. Many things happen by chance, by fate, by accident, because of our genetic make-up, simply because of when and where we were born. Success, trouble, prosperity, want - often they just happen. But here's what I want to say today. Success leads us into spiritual danger; but trouble leads us into spiritual opportunity. My text today is Isaiah 55:6; "Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near."

First, let's look at how success leads us into spiritual danger. Someone once gave a sermon with the title "The Trouble With Success," and it's true. Success can lead us into spiritual temptation.

In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul warns the church by speaking about the people of Israel. "They were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and the sea, all ate the same supernatural food and all ate the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ." God had set the Hebrews free from slavery. He gave Moses to lead them. God guided and protected them by the cloud, gave them manna to eat and water to drink in the wilderness, In fact, Christ himself was the rock they drank from. Now this was before Christ became incarnate, but Christ was with them as they journeyed.

The Hebrews experienced God's grace as no other nation had. God had revealed more of himself to them than to any other people. Spiritually speaking,

they were the most blessed people in the world. But this great blessing led them into spiritual arrogance. They thought that they could grumble, engage in idolatry and sexual immorality, flirt with evil and test God and nothing bad would happen. They lived under the bubble of God's protection, didn't they? But they suffered because of their arrogance and their sin. Now I don't believe that God sent the serpents or the destroyer. But these things came because they put themselves outside God's boundaries. As Paul says this is an example, a warning for us.

Success on any level can lead us into spiritual danger. Now you might think that success and comfort would lead one to give gratitude to God. But in fact, the opposite can happen. Success tempts us to forget God and to take all the credit ourselves. Success tempts us to turn from God and to become independent. I can show you how this happens. You might reasonably think that successful people in general give a higher percentage of their income to church and charitable causes. But studies show that the more successful and well-to-do one becomes, the smaller the percentage of income one gives away.

Or think back to simpler times when people were quite deprived by today's standards - the days when a family had only one car, lived in a house with no air conditioning, one bathroom, one telephone and one 19 inch TV. How did people ever manage? Anyway, back in those simpler days and even before, people filled the church on Thanksgiving Sunday and gave praise to their Maker. But as our standard of living has gone up, Thanksgiving Sunday has become one of our lower attended Sundays. I wonder why? Is it because people feel deprived, as if God has cheated them? Well, you can think about that one. There's no doubt that as a nation becomes more prosperous and comfortable, we become increasingly secular, cut off from our spiritual roots and our spiritual heritage.

Success leads us into spiritual danger for nations and for individuals. It tempts us to step outside the boundaries God has set for us. Tiger Woods was the most recent example of success and wealth and adulation driving one beyond any accepted boundaries. But you don't have to be Tiger Woods to let this happen. It can happen to almost anyone who enjoys a taste of success and popularity. I once saw a photo of a mountain out west. There was a rope barrier strung down part of the slope. The sign read "DO NOT SKI BEYOND THIS LINE - AVALANCHE DANGER." And yet skiers could be seen well beyond the barrier. No doubt they were good skiers, but what's that if an avalanche comes? It's a parable for so many people in our time. They become successful and think that normal laws and moral boundaries don't apply to them any longer. It's as if they're beyond them or above them. God says, "For my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts higher than your thoughts." Yet in our arrogance we say to God, "We know better than you, God. Our thoughts are higher than your thoughts, our

ways are higher than your ways.”

Success can cause you to fall, spiritually. Sadly many successful people do fall. Think of King David. But Paul says that it does not have to happen. We do have a choice. He says, “God is faithful and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out...” And the way out is God himself. The way to keep standing and not to fall is to cling to the Lord, feed at his table, stay immersed in God’s word, and keep looking up in prayer to the One from whom all blessings flow. I know successful people who thank God for their blessings, who walk humbly with God and honour God with their gifts and the fruits of their success. We have many of those people here among us, thank God. But you always have to be on guard, lest you fall.

But if success can lead us into spiritual danger; trouble can lead us to spiritual opportunities. Now one wants troubles or difficulties or pain. But inevitably they come and with them come spiritual opportunities. Now I don’t believe God sends troubles; at the most God allows them, if he sees that they may lead us to spiritual growth. And again, we have a choice. We can let troubles embitter us or we can take hold of the blessings they offer.

For one thing, times of trouble can cause us to examine our values. When things are smooth and we’re sailing along on the wings of success, we rarely question the values we live by. Through the prophet God asked the Hebrew people in exile, “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and that which does not satisfy?” Times of trouble can cause us to examine our values and to think about what’s really important in life. If the doctor says you have a dread disease, your priorities may quickly change. Many things you considered important now appear as trivial pursuits. We may see that we have been pursuing things that pass away at the expense of deeper things, things that last. In times of trouble we discover just how valuable friends and family and relationships really are. One man recovering from an serious illness admitted, “It was almost worth it to find out just how many friends I had and how much they cared.” Times of trouble can also make us more effective and compassionate ministers to others. They can make us more like Christ himself, who was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

Or if you lose your job that is not a good thing, and can cause real hardship. We pray for the unemployed that a good opportunity will soon come their way. But for many people the time becomes an opportunity to examine their lives, and take a new direction which makes better use of their gifts and is even more in keeping with God’s plan. In a way that happened to me. When I was an undergraduate, God planted the seeds in my mind of becoming a minister. But after graduation I settled into a comfortable and interesting job. Then the

company I worked for went through an upheaval, and I began wondering whether or not God wanted me to spend the rest of my life in that industry. There was nothing wrong with the industry or the work as such, but God used that time of trouble to rekindle his calling in me. And now I am marking my 23<sup>rd</sup> year as an ordained minister.

Trouble also brings us the opportunity to return to God. Isaiah said to the Hebrews, "Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near." Times of trouble bring God especially close to us. Now it is true that our sin drives a wedge between God and us, so that God may feel distant. But the Gospel proclaims that God has taken our sin upon himself in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We don't cover the gap between God and ourselves; in love God himself covers the gap and draws near to us. So if trouble comes to us because of some pattern of sinful behaviour or disobedience, God does not abandon us. Instead he comes with an opportunity to repent, to turn to him again and to live in a more obedient, God-honouring way. Isaiah says, "Let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon." When you reach out to God in times of trouble or even in times of sin and disobedience you will find him very near. You can find him because he has found you first.

Trouble brings us spiritual opportunities and as we respond to them we can receive great blessings, even eternal blessings. How many people, passing through the valley of the shadow of death, have finally turned to Christ and accepted him as their Saviour and Lord.

The preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick once gave a sermon entitled, "Finding God in Unlikely Places." The text was, "And Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was." The thick darkness - what a place to find God! Yet that is exactly where so many people have found God. In times of trouble people have called upon his name and found blessing and healing and new direction and new hope.

Has some trouble come upon you? It may be a difficult time for you. I won't deny that. But it is not a time for despair. That trouble brings you spiritual opportunities that you may not have otherwise. That trouble has brought God very near to you. And the best choice you can make is to obey Isaiah's invitation, "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near."