

## **Sermon for January 19, 2020 – “Holy”**

Second Sunday after Epiphany, Year A – Text(s): 2 Peter 3:8-15a

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We've all seen it, different professional athletes from different sports have shown just how fast one can rise in talent, money and fame and how equally fast one can fall to the ravages of pride, injury and poor decisions. Few have fallen further and faster than Mickey Mantle, the New York Yankees' great who retired in 1969. Mantle enjoyed the glory years of the Yankees through their repeated World Series appearances. But regret, not glory marked the downward spiral of his personal life once he retired from Major League Baseball at the age of 33. Mantle's drinking and womanizing did a number on his family, not to mention his own well-being. He disappeared into the dark life of alcoholism during the 1980's. He lost much of his purpose and meaning in life and described it to friends as his own internal hell. When he finally entered Baylor Medical Center for a liver transplant in June 1995, doctors gave him just days to live if he didn't have the transplant. A few weeks after his surgery Mantle walked into a press conference there at the hospital. It would prove to be his last public statement. Sadness and regret marked his words as he described the life he had squandered. He said, "God gave me a great body and an ability to play baseball. God gave me everything, and I just...pffft! I'd like to say to the kids out there if you're looking for a role model, this is a role model. Don't be like me." When a reporter asked Mantle if he'd signed a donor card Mantle said, "Everything I've got is worn out. "Although I've heard people say they'd like to have my heart it's never been used." At the same press conference he spoke of his selfishness, "I want to start giving back," he told those gathered, "All I've ever done is take." It turns out that that giving back wasn't going to happen. Four weeks after speaking to the press Mantle was dead from anemia, infection and quite possibly a broken heart. It's no fun to draw inspiration from someone else's glaring disappointments. But Mantle's self-destructive behavior and loss of meaning provide a wake-up call for anybody trying to live faithfully.

So, the question is if we want our life to add up to any measure of faithfulness what will it take? More the point what will it take to do so before it's too late? Many biblical scholars believe that Peter's Second Letter is kind of his last will and testament. As Peter saw his own life drawing to a close and sensed that he might not get another chance he communicated some final thoughts. He spoke with earnestness and seriousness hoping others would take his convictions to heart. "The day of the Lord will come like a thief and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise and all the elements will be dissolved with fire [and] since everything will be dissolved in this way what sort of persons do you want to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness?" In other words, what would your lives look like if the Lord showed up unannounced? In anticipation of that moment, what sort of persons do you want to be? Would there be any obvious evidence of holiness that others would notice?

Peter delivers a vision of the end times. Like others around him he had a firm expectation of what'd happen and the picture he portrays is one of gigantic meltdown. Everything will be dissolved. We might think of that cataclysmic time as a sudden dissolution of everything we rely on or find valuable. Let that sink in for a moment; our cell phones, car keys, favorite chair, bank accounts, our laptops, photo albums, books, jewelry, our sports memorabilia, stock portfolios, 401K's, and whatever else comes to mind all gone – pffff! Everything that makes life pleasurable or valuable – gone! I mean GONE! In such a scenario the big questions for those left standing would be What exactly would your life look like? Who would you be? Would there even be a “you” worth getting to know independent of everything to which you clung? Peter suggests that these sorts of questions aren't at all peculiar but are instead deeply spiritual in nature. The only way to address them realistically is to imagine a sudden and unexpected turn of events. The surprise turn of events described in scripture by Peter and others is hard for us to fathom, let alone appreciate. As Mickey Mantle seems to have felt over the course of his relatively short life most of us figure we'll have more time to make amends, more time to turn over a new leaf, more time to give back to others after mostly taking. But I'll say this, I don't know anybody who spends their days guessing, trying to predict, or worrying about when the Lord will return. I know I don't though I do think about it from time to time.

It got me to think about a story. A story about a poor Jewish man who lived in a small Russian town. The council there hired him to do a particular job. He was paid to sit at the town gate and be the first to greet the Messiah. He was then supposed to alert others to the Messiah's arrival. He was paid one ruble per week, which in today's money is about one and a half cents. The man's out-of-town brother visited him one day only to wonder why he took such a low-paying job. “Well, it's true,” the poor man said, “The pay is indeed low, but it's steady job work.” As I said, this may as well be us. I say that because I suspect that we've learned not to expect the Lord to show up at our doorstep unannounced. I also suspect that those of us who get lots of phone calls, anyone who'll likely be receiving phone calls or text messages tomorrow because it's a typical day, probably aren't expecting one from the Lord. I'm actually pretty sure of that. In fact, I wonder how badly people would freak out if they were to get a text message from the Lord that read “I'm five minutes away.”

Think about this for a moment. If the Lord were to ring your doorbell today what would the inside of your house tell Him? Would there be order or chaos? Would life inside seem cozy and peaceful or haphazard and disheveled? Or better yet, imagine the situation Peter describes. If everything inside your house were melted down and mysteriously dissolved what would be the shape of your relationships? Assuming you have other people living with you what would the character and feel within the house be? Would it be loving and caring? Or would it be tense and argumentative? Or if you live by yourself would the Lord be able to notice obvious signs of gratitude? Would He note evidence of an active prayer life?

Would your public and private lives appear to this surprise guest as congruent? **Since all these things will be dissolved in this way what sort of persons do you want to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness?"** Not an easy question, is it?

Holiness is a beautiful word in our vocabulary of faith. We use it appropriately to describe the interior passion that has us living with and for God. It's the vitality of the Spirit, or the exuberance of God dwelling richly within us in undiluted fashion. We use the word holiness inappropriately if we only mean to reduce life to certain behaviors resembling niceness or goodness. A misunderstanding of holiness puts God at our disposal and treats the impact of the divine as cosmetic. We become spectators living at a safe distance from God, eager to be in charge of our own spirituality. "Holiness is the most attractive quality," says Eugene Peterson, "...the most intense experience we ever get out of sheer life. We find ourselves in on the operations of God, not talking about them, not reading about them. 'Our God is consuming fire' not fire to be played with. Holy, Holy, Holy is not Christian needlepoint."

The liturgy at Mickey Mantle's funeral included a song he requested for the day, "Yesterday When I Was Young" by Roy Clark. He was on the old TV show "Hee-Haw". Roy wrote the song and it's a beautiful song but not one I get requests for to have played at funerals. But while it may be more than a bit unconventional, the words epitomize the regret Mantle felt and his sense of an existence from which he saw no escape...

*I teased at life as if it were a foolish game...  
...the way the evening breeze may tease a candle flame.  
The thousand dreams I dreamed, the splendid things I planned...  
I always built to last on weak and shifting sand...  
I ran so fast that time and youth at last ran out...  
I never stopped to think what life was all about...  
There are so many songs in me that won't be sung.  
I feel the bitter taste of tears upon my tongue.  
The time has come for me to pay for yesterday, when I was young.*

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing...in his letter about end times and his encouragement to live lives of holiness and godliness, Peter has a more hopeful word than this depressing song. Death doesn't involve our "paying for yesterday" or some "bitter taste of tears upon our tongue." No, the news is far better. And good news is always welcome especially as we begin a new year. If anything, says Peter, the Lord's patience with us is our salvation. We can wait all we want, which is part of the bargain of living holy and godly lives. But, we must recognize God's own patience with us. **"The Lord is not slow about His promise but is patient with you – not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance."**

What a beautiful hope! Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.