

“From Legendary to the Ledge”

Isaiah 43:1-13

Series: It's a Wonderful Life Week 2. Your Life is Priceless

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hogle

The Woodside Church

December 9, 2018

I have a new favorite vocabulary word: Turbidity. A week and a half ago I'd never heard the word. I thought it was the sleepy feeling you get after Thanksgiving dinner. “I need a nap. That Turkey gave me a lot of turbidity.” Then suddenly cell phones send out alarms: Warning! High Turbidity levels in the water. This major crisis makes the evening news. “High Turbidity in Yardley! Stay away!” Suddenly everyone is talking turbidity. I think to myself, “Wow the Turbidity levels must be sky high – at least 10,000.” How high are they? 1.7. That's it? What is the normal level? 1.0. So this whole crisis is due to 0.7 turbidity? But that was enough to close school. Restaurants and businesses shut. Lines formed at emergency water tankers. There was bubbling boiling water everywhere. An entire community paralyzed. Worst of all – no coffee at church!

I know turbidity is a serious issue. I'm grateful for those who worked round the clock to cleanse our water. And like many of you, this brief crisis reminds me how I take such blessings for granted and how others around the world never have pure, clean drinking water.

I also learned turbidity is not the real problem. As you now know, it's a measure of the particles which make water cloudy. Viruses and bacteria which cause stomach problems attach to these solids. The sediment shields these microorganisms from disinfection by chlorine or ultraviolet light. So the cloud of turbidity allows disease to hide and grow.

What's the turbidity level in your life? There is a host of viruses and bacteria which cause soul sickness: anger, fear, greed, lust, envy, pride, gluttony, addiction, bitterness, guilt, shame. These infections affect all of us. Yet they need a place to attach: particles to protect them, sediment to shield them, a cloud to cloak them so they can hide and grow.

Today I'd like to talk about two types of soul turbidity. One kind makes you believe you are **Legendary**. In the film *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey's whole life passes before our eyes. As a young man he has high aspirations. In one scene, George lets loose a flood of wishes.

Well, not just one wish. A whole hatful, Mary. I know what I'm going to do tomorrow and the next day and the next year and the year after that. I'm shaking the dust of this crummy little town off my feet and I'm going to see the world. Italy, Greece, the Parthenon, the Colosseum. Then I'm coming back here and go to college and see what they know . . . and then I'm going to build things. I'm gonna build air fields. I'm gonna build skyscrapers a hundred stories high. I'm gonna build bridges a mile long.

It's not wrong to have dreams and desires, wishes and goals. Where would the world be without dreamers and doers? Yet like turbidity in the water, all sorts of problems can hide and grow in the hunger to be legendary. When you succeed there is ego, pride and superiority. When you fail there is frustration, depression and discouragement. You may gain your goal and discover it doesn't satisfy. You may work long hours and become stressed and weary. You may lose your dreams and fall into despair.

This leads to the other type of turbidity – the **Ledge**. When your dreams disappear, when your plans fall apart, when people ignore you, reject you, hurt you, refuse you or abuse you, you begin to wonder, “What’s the point?” “Why am I here?” “Why was I born?” even “Why go on living?” Every time George Bailey surrenders another wish – global travel, college degrees, building cities – he dies a little more inside. The final crushing blow comes when his forgetful Uncle Billy misplaces eight thousand dollars on Christmas Eve. George now faces scandal, public humiliation, arrest and imprisonment. All he has to his name is a \$1,500 life insurance policy. Despair and self-pity lead him to the ledge of a bridge. As he prepares to throw himself off, his guardian angel Clarence shows up. Knowing George always puts other before himself, Clarence jumps in so George will put aside his suicide plan and save him. While the two warm up after their wintery swim in the river, George confesses what drove him to the ledge.
George: I'm worth more dead than alive.

Clarence: Now look, you mustn't talk like that. I won't get my wings with that attitude. You just don't know all that you've done. If it hadn't been for you . . .

George: Yeah, if it hadn't been for me, everybody'd be a lot better off. My wife, and my kids and my friends. Look, little fellow, go off and haunt somebody else, will you?

We've all had our moments on the ledge. Some of us have only thought about what the world would be like without us. Others have stepped too close to the edge. Sadly, some have gone too far.

Two types of turbidity: Legendary or the Ledge. Over the course of a life we might swing back and forth between these two poles. Sometimes we can be both in a single day. Like the murky sediment in water, these attitudes cloud your view of the world and, more critically, your worth. First, George Bailey's worth was based on achieving his legendary dreams. When they didn't come to pass his worth plummeted to the edge of jumping from the ledge. These two blind you from seeing your true worth.

The Lord says the same to the people of Israel. The cloudy turbidity of sin prevents them from hearing God's Word and seeing God's Truth.

Hear, you deaf; look, you blind, and see! Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one in covenant with me, blind like the servant of the Lord? You have seen many things, but you pay no attention; your ears are open, but you do not listen. (Isaiah 42:18-20)

The Lord created Israel to be His chosen people. Yet they let this go to their heads. Starting with the legendary reign of King Solomon they rebelled and turned to idols just

like the rest of humanity. Their sin led them to the ledge. And though the prophets told them to turn back, they took a step off the edge. The temple was burned to the ground, the land was devastated and the people were in exile.

In Isaiah 43, God shows them and us the right way to see ourselves – not as Legendary or Ledge worthy but **Loved**. Just as Clarence came down to rescue George from the frigid waters, so the Lord comes to tell us of His great love.

But now, this is what the Lord says, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel. “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze (Isaiah 43:1-2).

God is unwilling to let go of His people. He reaches out to His wayward children, He calls them by name and He gives them the greatest promise in Scripture, the most repeated promise in the Bible: I will be with you. ‘When troubles like floodwaters wash over you,’ says the Lord, ‘when dangers like firestorms scorch you, they will not harm you for I will be with you.’

When my children were small, Lisa and I would read them a story, a Bible passage, say a prayer and then tuck them in bed. After I put out the light, often I would hear a small voice in the dark say, “Stay with me.” It was impossible for me to refuse that request. I would lie next to them. Now in all that time they never said, “Make the dark go away.” They knew they had to go through the night. What they wanted was someone to go through it with them. Of course I didn’t stay with them all night. But God stays with you through whatever darkness you face. That’s His promise.

In November of 1950, during the Korean War, the North Koreans were pushed back. On their retreat, they took American and European prisoners of war on a terrible death march. The emaciated, hungry suffering soldiers were forced to march twenty miles a day. Those who could not keep up would fall out of line. Soon, shots signaled another execution. When a GI had trouble keeping up, Philip Crosby and his friends passed close and slowly whispered the same message: “God is near us in this dark hour. His love is real. His mercy is real. His forgiveness is real. His reward is waiting for us.”¹

God’s love for you is so great, He will pay any price to set you free from sin.

For I am the Lord, you God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead. Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you, I will give men in exchange for you, and people in exchange for your life. Do not be afraid; for I am with you (Isaiah 43:3-5).

¹ Philip Crosby, March to the Death, quoted in "Reasons to Fear Easter," Preaching Today, Tape No. 116.

He was not a legend in his own time. He reigned for less than ten years and died at the age of nineteen. He was largely forgotten by the world for more than three thousand years. So why is King Tutankhamen so famous today? The contents of his small four chamber tomb fill one quarter of the Museum in Cairo. All the large magnificent tombs of the great Egyptian Pharaohs were plundered long ago. His tomb gives us only a tiny hint of the glories of ancient Egypt. Yet God is willing to give up the wealth of all of Egypt, Sudan and Arabia just to have His precious, beloved children back. God is willing to pay any price for you. You are priceless.

In fact, He's already paid the greatest price for you – the life of His Son. There is no way you can earn His love and there's no need to. Even If you are standing on the ledge feeling battered by abuse, burdened by debt, crushed by a broken heart, devastated by divorce, shattered by addiction, cracked by unemployment, hammered by a family crisis, overwhelmed by grief, you are precious and valuable in God's sight. The Lord wants to love you and bring you back from the ledge.

There is only one thing you must do: trust only Him. Isaiah concludes:

“You are my witnesses,” declares the Lord, “and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no Savior. I have revealed and saved and proclaimed – I, and not some foreign god among you (Isaiah 43:10-12).

Our healing begins when we are willing to drop our desire to be legendary, step back from the dark ledge and follow only the Lord. At first, it may be difficult to clear away the cloudy turbidity of our souls. But once we take that step into the Light, we know it's the only way to be saved from the insanity of our sin.

It was March 1945. The war in Europe would only last another two months. Yet Germany was desperate to stop the allied invasion of their homeland. With few soldiers left, they sent children to man the lines. One of those youthful soldiers, Karl Schlesier remembers an amazing scene:

I was...in a battalion of teenage grenadiers fresh out of training [and] was sent into the front line east of the Rhine River after American forces had established a foothold on the east bank. Fresh American units were pushed across, and our battalion was ordered to plug a hole in the front line. We dug in three companies abreast on a slight rise in front of the little town of Kirchhellen. I was with the 1st Company in the center of the position. My company...numbered about 80 teenagers. In bitter fighting American troops pushed through on both sides but got stuck in front of my company. About 17 or 18 of us were left.... We huddled in two-man foxholes.

On the morning of March 28, amid smoldering tanks and twisted bodies, there suddenly came an eerie silence. Then it was broken by a single voice. A lone American soldier

walked...calmly toward the entrenched Germans, saying in a calm and low voice, "Come on out. Come on out." Schlesier remembers:

...The American soldier had two machine guns trained on him, and we were sure he knew this, but he just kept on coming. To have shot him would have seemed like murder because he was not a threat. He just wanted us to give up.

Schlesier and his buddy were the first to confront him. He was startled to see that the soldier was an American Indian. The German soldiers did as he said. They dropped their weapons and took off their helmets, tossing them back into the foxhole. The Indian soldier...told them to put their hands over their heads. Then he turned and walked toward the American lines without looking back as the German soldiers followed. Schlesier was overwhelmed:

He must have been the most reasonable man, the most perceptive, the most understanding, and by far the most brave. We had not expected to live, and he must have seen how idiotic this wall was, and he acted on his own to save us, risking his life in the process. Later in the prisoner-of-war camp we talked about him. If he had not come to get us, we would have died in our foxholes. His action was a personal one. He was not ordered to do what he did.... I owe him my life.²

God is calling you. Will you get up out of your foxhole and follow Him?

² Tim Giago, Spokesman-Review (8-24-00)