

**East Liberty Presbyterian Church**  
**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush**  
**November 14, 2010 (Stewardship Sunday)**  
**Isaiah 65:1-5, 17-24**  
**“Here I Am”**

Much of this sermon came together this past Thursday. As you may recall, it was a beautiful fall day here in Pittsburgh – mild temperatures and sunny skies. I take Thursdays as my day off, so Thursdays invariably include a batch of weekly household chores. For example, on that day we raked the leaves on our yard and collected them in big paper bags. The neighbors had a lawn service with a squadron of noisy leaf-blowers clean up their yard. I think our yard looked better, mostly based on personal pride from having done the work myself – just like a salad tastes better when some of the ingredients come from your own garden. On Thursday we had chili for dinner. I remember the sizzling sound of ground beef being cooked in the skillet. I remember chopping up the green peppers, cutting them in half to expose the toothy grins of their inner core with all those tiny white seeds. When it came time to dice the onions, I remember the moment the pungent fumes made my eyes sting and water. Someone in my household, who will remain nameless, has been known to don swimming goggles when she dices onions. As a kid, my mother would have me hold a slice of rye bread in my mouth while I diced the onions to keep my eyes from watering – so I’m not sure whether swim goggles or a dangling piece of rye bread makes for a sillier sight.

On Thursday I ironed some dress shirts whose “no ironing needed” labels lied to me. Ironing shirts always makes me remember my Dad, who advised me not to spend too much time on the lower tails of the shirts since that part was always hidden in your slacks. And on Thursday I finished a novel by Marilynne Robinson called “Home,” a good book that is the sequel to her earlier, Pulitzer prize-winning novel “Gilead.” In the book, a troubled son named Jack finds his way back to the family home. At one point in the story, he is asked the question “What is a soul?” Jack shrugged and said, “Soul is what you can’t get rid of.”<sup>1</sup> That definition speaks of the permanence of our soul – how it is something that lasts, that doesn’t age or diminish or disappear over time. But Jack had not followed an easy path in life, so his definition was a bit darker than we usually expect. His full response was this: “[Soul] is what you can’t get rid of. Insult, deprivation, outright violence.”

In Jack’s definition, the soul has a real permanence to it; it consists of the things you can’t get rid of. It is past memories and future aspirations all bundled up together with our present experiences. It is that part of us that dices onions now, even as we remember doing it years before in our mothers’ kitchen. It is ironing dress shirts now for future Sunday services, even as we remember our parent’s advice from long ago. It is good things and bad things – joy and happy memories, and yes, insults, deprivation, tragedy and outright violence that, once occurred, never leave us entirely. It is the collection of the parts that, God bless us, make us who we are.

So to us cooks, leaf rakers, saints and sinners alike, Isaiah offered a word of hope from the Lord. He said *“Behold, I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating”* (Isa 65:17-18a). It is the language of heaven, of long life, peace and security, of blessings that will flow smoothly from one generation to the next. For a nation that had long known exile in the land of Babylon, here was a promise of returning home. For people who had seen their land taken away, the crops they planted harvested by enemy hands, and the children of their heart made to become slaves and maidservants for another people, these promises were a balm to made the wounded whole and heal their sin-sick souls.

And what Isaiah said to Israel long ago, Isaiah speaks to us today. In the Lord we can rejoice and be glad. To us who have seen death and known loss, God is near and the sound of weeping shall not last forever. To all who have struggled to support ourselves and families, who have lost jobs and homes, we should not give up hope. In faith we do not labor in vain or bear children for calamity; the Lord has promised a blessing to us.

But when? Is God’s realm, God’s time of shalom and justice only something that comes to pass in the distant future? Did Israel ever see the fulfillment of Isaiah’s words? Will we live to see it, to experience it and know a time when our sin-sick souls are healed and able to rest in perfect peace? Sometimes it is preached in churches that, in time, in the sweet by-and-by, we will finally rest in God’s embrace and all will be well. But to us Thursday-folk, who rake leaves and dice onions, who sit by hospital beds and figure out which bills out of the many can be paid this month – to all of us like Jack who define our souls as that stuff you can’t get rid of – Isaiah’s words about a new heaven and new earth ring hollow because we can’t always see the good news now.

What’s missing in this equation? Is it possible to stand with our feet firmly planted on the ground and yet describe what heaven is like? Is it possible to be Thursday people of garden gloves and autumn leaves, chopping blocks and dirty dishes, headaches and heartaches and talk with clarity about the nature of God’s love for us? That’s a very tall order. Only one person has done this well – Jesus of Nazareth, the one born in Bethlehem long, long ago. But Marilynne Robinson’s book offered a second definition of soul. Another character, Jack’s sister, also asked what a soul is – whether it is part of us, a spirit or mind or something permanent within us. She quickly realized that she couldn’t answer a question as weighty as that, so she ended up with this beautifully-succinct definition. She said the soul “was what the Lord saw when His regard fell upon any of us.”<sup>2</sup> The soul is what God sees when God’s glance, God’s regard, falls upon us.

Suddenly the perspective is reversed. The soul is not so much something we possess, something we work hard to perfect or which we risk losing – it is the way we appear to God, seen not as the world sees us but as God sees us: completely, totally, the whole messy package. Think back to the opening verses from Isaiah 65. The same God of the new heaven and new earth, where weeping and cries of distress are no more to be heard, is also the God who says, *“I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, ready to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, ‘Here I am, here I am’”*

*even though they didn't call on my name. I held out my hands all day long to people who were rebellious, who walked in ways that are not good and who chose to follow their own devices" (Isa 65:1-2).*

On one level those are humbling words. God seeks us out when we, like Adam and Eve in the garden, are hiding in the bushes embarrassed about our nakedness; when we, like Cain are quickly washing the blood off our hands and arguing with God "Am I my brother's keeper?"; when we like Sarah laugh in God's face when told we will be fruitful despite our old age; when we like Jonah are told to go to Nineveh and instead we run to the first boat sailing in the opposite direction. God stands with arms outstretched saying "Here I am, here I am", yet we head to the hills like the prodigal son with coins jingling in our pockets; or we scurry around vulnerable to so much pain and risk even as God, like a mother hen, stands with her wings outstretched anxious to provide us safety and shelter. Yes, it is humbling.

But it is also encouraging and empowering. God is proactive – the one ready to be sought out and found, the one with arms extended. The one who says, "*Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking [and trying to put words to their needs and pain and hopes and dreams], I will hear*" (Isa 65:24). It is that assurance that gives us strength to do what is right, to show compassion and to work for justice on the Thursdays, the Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays of our life now. This proactive, seeking-out God gives us real hope – telling us not to compromise or give up, but to envision a time and place where no sound of weeping or cry of distress is heard, when homes will be built and inhabited, vineyards planted and food available to all who hunger, and earth and heaven will be one.

On this Sunday, we make real commitments to God and to one another – to be part of a community of faith, to sincerely try to care for the needy, to discipline ourselves through the pledging of our time and resources for Christ's ministry, and mostly to be together – Thursday-type people who join together for Sunday-worship. Despite all the craziness and imperfections and messiness of living as a community, we commit ourselves to become a church that prays together, that listens, works, and dares to proclaim that resurrection is real and unstoppable. Why do we do this? Not because our soul is simply the stuff that we can't be rid of. No, it's because our soul is what God sees – and God's glance is loving, healing, and life-giving. God-in-Christ sees us and is with us always. And God-the-Holy-Spirit fills us with life and vision and passion. Before a word is on our lips, our God knows it completely. Before we finish speaking, God breaks in and says, "Here I am. Don't look away. Don't be afraid."

We each have a soul. It is what God sees when God's regard falls upon us. Come together, all you Thursday-people and Sunday-worshippers. Come forward, you Thursday-workers and Sunday-stewards. And then go in peace, all you Thursday-children and Sunday-disciples, living now and always as ones whom the Lord our God sees.

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Marilynne Robinson, Home, 2008, p. 287.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.