

This week former President Jimmy Carter announced that he has been diagnosed with spreading melanoma, and that it has spread to his brain. Ninety years old, he has begun treatment. As I watched his press conference about this, it struck me that Jimmy Carter gives us an example of a well-built life, a life that has refused to lose its foundation even when dealing with political pressures and the power and lack of power that came with being President of the USA.

Through it all, Jimmy Carter has held onto his faith in God, and not just by using religious words, but by making sure that God and what God wants has been his priority in life. He has worked with Habitat for Humanity for years, and has for decades been a teacher in his hometown Baptist church. He established the Carter Foundation, which has worked tirelessly to eradicate the Guinea Worm from African countries and has done all sorts of other good throughout the world. Carter has put his efforts as well as his money to help others. This, I believe, is what Jesus meant when he spoke about building a house on a strong foundation, dug down deep, instead of a house with no foundation. This is also what Paul was talking about when he counseled the Christians in Ephesus – and us today – to put on the full armor of God. Be strong in the faith. Gird yourself with God's truth and wear righteousness in front of your heart. Whatever shoes you wear should make you ready to go proclaim the gospel of peace. Pray in the Spirit at all times. In other words, in this tough world, be ready to boldly serve as God would have you serve.

I remember when I first became a pastor, back in 1980. I was idealistic and fervently believed that God would tell me what to do each step of the way. Well, once I became pastor of the church in New Haven, I quickly learned that God's message could become hard to hear in the midst of what lots of other folks wanted to tell me to do! It can be a challenge for a pastor to listen for the Lord in the midst of the expectations and opinions that surface in a congregation. My husband, Woody, frequently found reason to warn me, "Florence, you take your defeats too hard and your successes too personally. It's not supposed to be about you; it's supposed to be about God!"

Put on the full armor of God. Build a strong foundation of faith. This is hard in today's world. Theologian/author Walter Wink suggested that the principalities and powers Paul referred to have essentially hoodwinked our society today into an infatuation with VIOLENCE. In Wink's words: "Violence is the ethos of our times. It is the spirituality of the modern world. ... Violence simply appears to be the nature of things. It is what works. ... It is embraced with equal alacrity by people on the left and on the right, by religious liberals as well as religious conservatives. The threat of violence, it is believed, is alone able to deter aggressors...We learned to trust the Bomb to give us peace..." - Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*

The late C.S. Lewis believed that the "powers" expressed themselves in modern bureaucracy, where the greatest evil "is conceived and ordered in clean, carpeted, warmed and well-lighted offices, by quiet executives(men) with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven

cheeks who do not need to raise their voices. Hence, naturally enough, my symbol for hell is something like the bureaucracy of a police state or the office of a thoroughly nasty business concern.” (C.L.Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*)

Today, for me, both Wink and Lewis make sense, but there seems also to be a strong, “Me-ism” that has overwhelmed our society. *My* way, *My* wants, *MY* rights, *MY* possessions, *MY* time, *MY* plans... *MY* infatuation with my stuff and myself can drive a wedge between God and me and between me and my neighbors. This ultimately weakens me and breaks up the foundation of my life.

So there is Jimmy Carter, surely in for a rough ride with treatments for his spreading cancer, and yet he smiles a peace-filled smile and says that he’s ready for a new adventure, whatever that ends up meaning. But today, in Plains, GA, he is teaching his customary Sunday School class, because he knows what is important in his life. Part of putting on the whole armor of God is realizing what is really important in life.

Preacher/Professor Fred Craddock wrote about somebody whose priorities were shaken up big-time. In Craddock’s words: “Glenn Adsit, a schoolmate of mine from years ago, ministered mostly in China. He was under house arrest in China when the soldiers came one day and said, ‘You can return to America.’ He and his wife were celebrating, and the soldiers said, ‘You may take 200 pounds with you.’

“Well, they’d been there for years. Two hundred pounds. They got their scales and started the family arguments: two children, wife, husband. We must have this vase. Well, this is a new typewriter. What about my books? And they weighed everything and finally, right on the dot, they had two hundred pounds of stuff. The soldier asked, ‘Ready to go?’ ‘Yes, we are.’ ‘Did you weigh everything?’ ‘Yes.’ You weighed the kids?’ No, we didn’t.’ ‘Weigh the kids.’ And in a moment, typewriter and vase and all became trash.” *Craddock Stories*, pp. 22-23

Dig deep to find the ROCK on which your life can be strong. That rock is God, the God who created this world and everything in it, the God who has persistently put up with and labored to save failure-prone people who are easily satisfied with junk food and false securities – even us! The God who, when his beloved people could not abide by the very rules/commandments God gave them to help them live, finally put everything on the line and fully entered human life in the person of Jesus.

Our duty today and every day, as those who have claimed that we intend to follow Jesus, is to choose to make the Lord our priority, and to turn away from those things in our lives that tempt us to serve something else. Jesus said that the most important things we can do are these: “Love the Lord your God with everything you are and have,” and “Love your neighbor as much as you love yourself.” He did not tell us to go around yelling at folks that they are sinners and need to be saved. He did not tell us to be sure to have a gun in the closet in case someone comes to rob us. He did not tell us to serve money first and then slip God a 10% tithe to keep God happy. He said, “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will

be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” (Matthew 6:24)

I close with a true story, which shows the limitations of our human perspective.

116 years ago, in 1899, Charles H. Duell, U. S. Patent Commissioner said, in a speech before the Washington Businessmen’s Association, that he would probably be the last person to hold his position because, “in my opinion, everything that can be invented has been invented.” From his perspective there would be nothing new on the horizon.

Four years later the first airplane flew, 30 years later penicillin was discovered, 70 years later the semi-conductor was introduced. Indeed half of Thomas Edison’s 1,093 patents came after Duell’s proclamation. And literally millions of patents have since been issued since for everything from velcro and silly putty to photo cells and genetically altered plants.

It seems so obvious now how wrong Duell was, but it’s more important is to understand why he believed history had reached the end of creativity—because everything that HE could imagine had already been invented. HE could not foresee the vast frontier that lay ahead in science and technology in agriculture in architecture—from his perspective the door was closed, the future was dead. (Found in various sources)

Our human understanding cannot see very far into the future; we do not know what any day or year will present to us. But God does. And God asks us to trust in God loving care and to follow the way of Jesus. Jesus gives us a Word that may often sound absurd in this world. “Love your enemies, pray for those who hurt you. Come unto me, and you will find rest for your souls..” This is our Rock, our solid foundation and hope for forgiveness, new life today, and life everlasting.

May we be strong in our faith and put on the armor, not of this world, but of God. Let us immerse ourselves in the Bible. Let us find life by giving our own to help others. Let us constantly be on the lookout for reasons to thank God for life itself. By this, we will love and serve the Lord and discover that the foundation upon which we stand will hold firm through every storm, every cancer diagnosis, every layoff, every one of our failures, even to the life-beyond-death offered us after our well-built-in-Jesus living. By the grace of our Lord, this can be so! Thank God! Amen.