

## Of Noble Success and Divine Gain

July 1, In the Year of Our LORD, 2007

Gates Presbyterian Church

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2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Galatians 5:1, 13-25 and Luke 9:51-56

“O Beautiful for Spacious Skies”

There was an interesting juxtaposition of my readings of the last two weeks, of scripture and an epic novel. Since Sally and I were in Alaska, I thought it behooved me to read James Michener's book about that part of the world. Even though I was most interested in more recent history, I am a creature of habit and insist on reading history in sequence. I am not even half way through the 1073 page paperback because, as is his style, Michener starts with geological events of billions of years ago. He quickly moved to recorded history, but at page 456 (42.49% of the book – what? You think I don't know that?), I am still not out of the nineteenth century.

As with his books “Hawaii” and “Texas,” Mr. Michener easily weaves facts and personages of history with fictional characters and accounts. My problem is that I want to know who is historical and who isn't, so I often return to the first pages of the book where the author lists which characters are fiction and which are true figures. The intrigue was in the overlap of motifs as I read “Alaska” and scripture passages for today.

How fascinating the variations and nuances of human motives! We read today of Elisha's noble motives. Elisha accepted Elijah's mantle, the one with which Elijah parted the waters and which Elisha then used to do the same. This wasn't the Red Sea across which they walked, but, like Moses, they had God's spirit at their disposal for noble deeds. Elisha, Elijah's follower and disciple, had *asked* to be Elijah's successor and received assurance of that as evidenced when he witnessed Elijah go up into heaven. We also read how Elisha asked for a “double share” of Elijah's spirit. A “double share” is what an older or oldest son received as an inheritance upon the death of the father. If there were three sons, the inheritance would be divided four ways with the oldest getting two parts and the two younger ones getting one each. To ask for a “double share” was to ask to be the prime inheritor. In this case, Elisha did not ask for material wealth. He wanted to inherit Elijah's spirit. Elisha's request was noble – that is pure of motive – and was grounded in seeking that which was divine. It was grounded in humility, grace and *a sense of responsibility* for the people in his care.

In reflecting on our reading from Luke, we might regret how the Samaritan villagers did not want to receive Jesus, but here the significance is found in how the disciples responded to that rejection. Like some more narrow minded, believe-as-I-do-or-God-will-get-you Christians of today, the disciples wanted “fire to come down from heaven and consume them.” Not surprisingly, Jesus rebuked His disciples for their less than loving motives! And then, in our reading from Paul's Letter to the people of Galatia, we have that classic list that so clearly distinguishes motives that are “of the flesh,” that is, human, and those that are of the Spirit and are noble and divine. We looked at some of those in our Time With Our Younger Disciples. [distinguishing between greed, envy, quarreling, jealousy, hate and anger *and* love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control]

One of James Michener's most famous lines comes from "Hawaii" in which he mentions the missionaries who went to Hawaii in 1820, of how "they went to do good and instead did well." The first group sent by the American Board of Foreign Missions went to Hawaii to do the good work of converting native peoples to Christianity, but over time, also converted the economy, politics and society so that as sugar plantation owners, these missionaries profited and did very, *very* well. Let's be clear, the Chinese had already convinced the Hawaiians to strip their islands of sandalwood, a precious commodity. Similarly, the Russians recklessly exploited the northern Pacific, nearly wiping out the population of seals and otter before other national groups arrived. Later, in introducing rum to the Eskimos, German and Boston whalers accomplished something far worse, for in trading rum for pelts, the Eskimos grew so addicted to rum that the men failed to hunt for meat for the upcoming winter – which meant that the whole community then starved to death. Undeterred, the ship captains moved on to another next community the next year, so that over time, village after village would simply disappear!

In "Alaska," Michener describes a Presbyterian Minister, The Rev. Jackson, whose motives are, for the most part, extolled. Mr. Jackson took righteous exception to the behavior of those who exploited the land and its peoples. All Mr. Jackson needed do was go to those verses from the fifth chapter of Galatians to list the "works of the flesh" that were the ruin of whole communities of native peoples, and in particular "enmity, strife, jealousy, selfishness and drunkenness." With the help of a courageous sea captain Michael Healy (another historical figure), those men who exploited the land and its people were challenged on land and on the high seas, often with success. To The Rev. Jackson's credit, he embraced the work of other Protestant traditions as well, even assisted in the construction of churches of Methodists, Congregationalists and Baptists. He had one noted prejudice, namely for the Russian Orthodox Church, but that seemed driven by his distaste of the exploitation that Russians fur traders had done. Apparently, it was lost on him that the men of many other nations had been and could be just as exploitive.

The point is that all of us need to take a step back at look at what motives drive us as persons and as a people. Are our motives noble and pure, unmarred by more base and human motivations of which Paul writes in his epistle? About a week ago, I reached the section in Michener's "Alaska" that spoke of the discovery of gold. Throughout history, the quest for gold elicited the worst of human behavior, but it is a chemical characteristic of gold that is apropos for today's examination of human motivations. Mr. Michener describes gold as a "noble element." If it was so described in High School, I missed the significance that to be a "noble element" means that under natural conditions, gold does not mix with anything else, it remains by itself, apart from other metals and elements .... it doesn't oxidize or amalgamate with lesser elements. Gold does not allow itself to be diluted or diminished by anything else. Gold is gold is gold.

As Christians, as persons of this great land, our motives are to be as noble and pure if not as divinely driven as gold is noble. We are not to allow "desires of the flesh" to sully our motives. Our dreams, visions, and goals are to be motivated by the higher standards we hold dear as Christians. Our youth did an excellent job of challenging us this past "Earth Day," lest our pursuit of worldly goods come at the expense of natural resources. Likewise, do we not need to question the benefit that comes from less expensive goods as made in places like China and Central America which in many instances are manufactured in exploitive ways? The pollution of the land, water, and air in China is appalling! I certainly hope no one thinks that in order for us to enjoy the products we do at the prices we pay ... that it is OK for the Chinese to choke on

their air, get sick drinking their own water, and find that less and less land is arable because of the poisons that go untreated back into the land and air! We sing of “Spacious Skies” and certainly Sally and I enjoyed the beautiful and spacious skies of Alaska, but should we not be concerned lest *any* skies of this world be sullied as the result of human motives like greed?

It is from the third stanza of our beautiful hymn “O Beautiful for Spacious Skies,” that I found the title for today’s sermon.

America! America! May God thy gold refine,  
till all success be nobleness, and every gain divine.

Those words include a challenge. They serve as a daily litmus test for us as Christians and as a people. It is fitting to celebrate all that is noble in our ideals as a nation, our divinely inspired purposes and motives. It is fitting that each succeeding generation accept the “mantle,” the responsibility for sharing with the next generations all that is good and noble and divine - as persons of faith, as the church, and as people of a great nation. But there is an inherent warning in those words as well, for to start with noble purposes is of no use if we become less than noble in our actions - as people of faith and/or as people of communities.

More than one hundred years ago, a huge debate ensued in this nation about what took us into what is called the Spanish-American War. How much safer it is to examine that debate than to delve into the one some think is mirrored in the conflicts of today. As it turns out, the skeptics back then were correct, for almost all accounts of that short conflict agree. There was suspicion at the time, and there is more evidence now, that the powers-that-be, including Mr. Hearst and Mr. Pulitzer of the press and the expansionist politicians in Washington D.C., were anxious for us to get into conflict with the Spanish so that we could, as we did, obtain possession from Spain of Cuba, Guam, Puerto Rico and the Philippines and become a world power. Our own history books condemn our behavior as motivated by less than noble motives. The rush to war facilitated by the manipulation of information and in particular by what was called the “yellow press,” is all too often mirrored in the rush to strife and war that so many peoples on this globe continue to embrace in our generation. The alternative, the embrace of the noble ways of peace, gets lost in the pursuit of human gain if not conquest. That was true in Hawaii, Alaska, and is tragically true in the Darfur region of the Sudan and in so many parts of the Middle and Near East. That behavior stands as a challenge to us in our daily lives as people who sometimes scramble to succeed and gain at everything no matter the cost.

Did we really need to be reminded how precious is human life or how all life needs to be protected by all that is noble and divine? We are reminded as a congregation how fragile and frail is all of human life, for all too many of our midst are ill, some seriously. Yet, in every instance, including those tragic events like the death of five Fairport High School Graduates, we seek the higher ground. We try to embrace all that is holy and divine. It is difficult to find anything noble in the deaths of those five young ladies, but an article at the bottom of the front page of today’s Democrat & Chronicle suggests that parents are sitting down with their kids, are thinking through who is driving where and when and with how many people in the vehicles with distractive devices like cell phones and iPhones. There is nobility in that, in making sure that in the wake of this tragedy we learn lessons, hard lessons, but lessons nonetheless. As God’s people we have apparently not learned an alternative to war, but in small ways, can we not learn the ways of embracing our neighbors as sisters and brothers of faith?

Elisha accepted the mantle of responsibility for the faith – and remained true to his calling. Ultimately, the same disciples who wanted to bring down lightning from heaven on those “blasted” Samaritans “got it right” and became faithful followers of “the Way,” Christianity. All of us are challenged to live by the fruits of the Spirit as described by Paul in his letter to the Galatians, and each of us, every day, needs to look at what motivates us, drives us, and challenges us. We are called upon to reject that which exploits, turn away from that which debases the earth and any other human soul and instead seek success that is noble and gain that is nothing short of divine.

Amen.