

05/21/17 BUCYRUS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

“THE LIGHT NOT THE SMOKE”

Pastor Mike Corwin

Text: Acts 22:1-16 God’s Word: Colossians 2:1-10

I - THE WIZARD:

I remember watching the Wizard of Oz movie as a youngster and I also remember that I learned a valuable lesson from it that I used throughout my life even to today. DON'T TRUST HUMANS!

Dorothy lands in the Land of Oz and gets advice from the munchkins to go see the Wizard of Oz. He is great and powerful and can help her get home which is her biggest desire. Along the way she meets a scarecrow who wants a brain, a tin man who wants a heart, and a lion who wants courage. She perpetuates the misguided advice that they too need to see the Wizard because he can give them what they want. They finally get an audience with him and they see a giant floating head surrounded by smoke. From that smoke they hear the Wizard tell them if they want him to grant their desires they must first get the wicked witch’s broom and bring it to him which they do after Dorothy throws water on her and melts her. Back to the Wizard they go, happy because they've fulfilled their end of the bargain so now the Wizard will fulfill his and give them the things they asked for and he promised.

But they find out the Wizard does not intend to keep his end of the bargain and never did. He rattles the metal thunder, sends up more smoke, raises his voice, and tells them to get out. Then Toto pulls back the curtain and reveals the Wizard is just a human like them. And once he is brought into the light and revealed as a fake, he just keeps going like nothing ever happened and convinces them a piece of paper makes you smart, a pocket watch gives you a heart, and a medal gives you courage. Then he sails away leaving Dorothy to continue wishing she could go home. The Wizard turns out to be nothing but a scam artist!

II - ALL SMOKE:

It was watching all of this that convinced me you just can't trust humans. There are some exceptions, but I see this rule applying to humanity as we know it. Just like the Wizard, people want you to do something for them and a good part of the time they won't return the favor and do what they promised for you. Just like the Wizard they are full of grand ideas, a legend in their own minds, but they can't deliver on their promises and aren't even equipped to do so when it gets right down to it. Do you know people like this? And when they get caught they just throw up more smoke...more diversions, and continue to try to scam you.

How about those who thought they were Wizards of our Faith. Those who wanted people to follow them but were living in the smoke of their own grandeur.

- Jim Jones who founded the "People's Temple" and moved to Guyana to escape the US government's intervention. His church ceased to exist when he shot a US senator, had his followers drink the Kool-Aid and then committed suicide.
- David Koresh who became a leader in the Branch Davidian Church and led his followers to their death in Waco, Texas.
- There's the Televangelist Jim Baker who was convicted of scamming his TV congregation out of millions of dollars.
- How about Jimmy Swaggert's tearful confession on TV when he got caught with his pants down - literally!
- The KKK was founded by some people's interpretation of the Scriptures, as was keeping women from voting and from being allowed to have leadership in some of the denominations.

I believe as I look around that there are still pastors who blow up a lot of smoke in the name of Jesus to line their own pockets and get people to follow them. Wizards are alive and well in our world today. The problem is they gain followers who should really be looked at like victims.

III - COLOSSIANS:

The Apostle Paul knew all about smoke screens and scams. All about humans who couldn't stay on track and tried to lead others off of it too. We can see that in the letter to the church at Colosse you heard read earlier.

There was an early Christian Church located there. And it had been founded on the true doctrine and teachings of Jesus. But sometime after it's founding it got scammed by the Wizards who wanted the people to follow them instead of Jesus and the Apostles. There were some teachings going on that were confusing the followers of Christ and trying to draw them away from the teachings of the church. Instead of being saved by grace through faith they were now being told that they had to have the ritual circumcision of the Jewish tradition, observe the traditional dietary laws, and pay attention to all the Jewish high Holy Days if they wanted to be saved. They were also teaching that the creation of the earth and the process of Salvation was done by numerous mysterious powers who had to be worshipped and kept happy. Because of this Jesus was being demoted into a relatively minor part of the story mixed in with angels and others. They were also teaching that the human body is evil and was to be treated as the enemy. And talk about smoke blowing wizards...the people who were teaching all this new philosophy claimed to be "Christian" teachers!

In his letter Paul warns the people they are not to be drawn in by what he called "empty philosophies and high sounding nonsense." All of these things came from human thinking and the spiritual powers of the world...not from the heavenly powers and teachings of Jesus. He tells them that all they have to do is follow Jesus and his teachings - Jesus who brought God to earth in human form, who taught us about God's love, and who gave us all the wisdom and knowledge we need to not be taken in by the scams of people. All we have to do is follow the light, not the smoke.

IV - TEXT:

And Paul knew well the difference between the smoke of mankind and the Light of Jesus the Christ.

Acts 22:1-16 (NLT)

¹“Brothers and esteemed fathers,” Paul said, “listen to me as I offer my defense.” ²When they heard him speaking in their own language, the silence was even greater. ³Then Paul said, “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, and I was brought up and educated here in Jerusalem under Gamaliel. As his student, I was carefully trained in our Jewish laws and customs. I became very zealous to honor God in everything I did, just like all of you today. ⁴And I persecuted the followers of the Way, hounding some to death, arresting both men and women and throwing them in prison. ⁵The high priest and the whole council of elders can testify that this is so. For I received letters from them to our Jewish brothers in Damascus, authorizing me to bring the Christians from there to Jerusalem, in chains, to be punished. ⁶“As I was on the road, approaching Damascus about noon, a very bright light from heaven suddenly shone down around me. ⁷I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ ⁸“Who are you, lord?’ I asked. “And the voice replied, ‘I am Jesus the Nazarene, the one you are persecuting.’ ⁹The people with me saw the light but didn’t understand the voice speaking to me. ¹⁰“I asked, ‘What should I do, Lord?’ “And the Lord told me, ‘Get up and go into Damascus, and there you will be told everything you are to do.’ ¹¹“I was blinded by the intense light and had to be led by the hand to Damascus by my companions. ¹²A man named Ananias lived there. He was a godly man, deeply devoted to the law, and well regarded by all the Jews of Damascus. ¹³He came and stood beside me and said, ‘Brother Saul, regain your sight.’ And that very moment I could see him! ¹⁴“Then he told me, ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and hear him speak. ¹⁵For you are to be his witness, telling everyone what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶What are you waiting for? Get up and be baptized. Have your sins washed away by calling on the name of the Lord.’

Paul is on one of his missionary journeys and is in the city of Jerusalem. He was seen there by some Jews who had been angered by him in Asia when he preached about Christ being superior to the Jewish laws. They raised their voices and called the Jews there to rise up against him. This they did with such noise and force the soldiers came out of the nearby fortress to see what was going and arrested Paul to take back to the fort so they could get to the bottom of the whole thing. As they reached the steps of the fort, Paul asked to be able to speak and then told them the story of his faith.

He basically says that he was once just like them. As a matter of fact he was better than most of them. He was covered by the smoke of the Jewish faith traditions. He was so covered by the smoke that he went to get educated under a well known teacher named Gamaliel. This teacher taught him all he needed to know to follow the path of becoming one of the Pharisee who kept

the faith. He was so enamored by all of this that he went on a personal journey/quest to find and persecute those who followed Jesus and the teachings of the early church.

He was on the road to Damascus, not to get a witches broom, but to find and arrest Christians and drag them back to Jerusalem for prosecution and persecution. By doing this he would receive the blessings for the church leaders and, he believed, of God who they represented. But it was on this road...his yellow brick road...that his life changed forever. It was on this road that the Light of Heaven broke through the darkness and smoke and knocked him to the ground. Through this light Jesus spoke to him. Through this light, Paul was sent on to Damascus where he didn't round up Christians but had his sight restored, was baptized, and became a follower of Jesus. He now began walking the path not for a Wizard, but for his Lord and Savior...for God.

Never again did he fall for the teachings and scams of people, regardless of how religious they claimed to be. Never again did he let himself be overcome by the smoke and darkness of human leaders. Instead he became a follower of Jesus. He spread the Gospel to the Gentiles, he led people away from the Wizards and towards Jesus. He spent the rest of his life in the light!

V - THE LIGHT:

There are all kinds of false prophets and teachers in the world today. Those who would gladly take your money and misuse your trust. There are those who claim to know a new and better way to be faithful and to find God. Those who will tell you to climb a mountain for wisdom, or worship crystals for healing and power. Those who will lead you to believe Jesus wasn't the Savior but just a good man who taught some pretty radical stuff.

There are Wizards who will stand behind a curtain with a smoke screen and tell you that God isn't the priority he thinks he should be. That school activities, sports, shopping events, and a whole list of things can come before him. He's just one of the things that call for your time, energy, and money.

And I'm telling you they are all wrong. God is the number one priority in life and, if he's not there in your life, you need to put him there. If he's not there you need to get knocked to the ground in the presence of the brilliant light from heaven and have your life changed too.

You see...it's not about the smoke...it's about the light. It's not about the man behind the curtain but it's about the man on the cross.

AMEN