

*A Dimly Burning Wick*  
Isaiah 42:1-9, Acts 10:34-43

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I'd like to begin today's sermon by saying a word of thanks to our outgoing elders: Randy, Tony, Mary, Shannon and Daisy. On behalf of the congregation, thank you. Now, if you in the congregation don't know why we're thanking them, let me give you a quick rundown of some of what they've done over the past three years. I think from time to time, it's useful to let the congregation know exactly what goes into running this joint. So here we go. They attended meetings, lots of meetings. And our elders will tell you, I have a point of personal pride that I try to hold that meeting to one hour. I'm sometimes successful and sometimes unsuccessful in that. Let's take that as an average. We meet for Session meetings 11 times a year. That's 33 hours. In the working world, that's just about enough to qualify you for benefits. That is not, of course, all they did. Our Session here at Morningside is not an advisory board. It is a working board. And so our elders each served on ministry teams as chairs and as support. That, by the way, is where the real hours racked up for them. There were a couple of moments of crisis during their term. We learned, for example a while back, that something was terribly amiss in one of the partner agencies with which we worked. Our members had given tremendous time, and we as a congregation given money. We found out something was amiss, and it was amiss with children. We were terribly concerned. It involved an immediate response from us as a congregation. And so our Session met together and talked, and cried, and prayed until they reached what we believed was the right decision. In that process, we discovered we needed a child protection policy as a congregation ourselves. I can't even estimate the number of hours our elders gazed at that one. We had budget meetings. We taught new member classes together. Some of you joined this congregation with some of the elders who are going out today, concluding their service, as the ones who welcomed you into the congregation. I think a word of thanks is definitely in order to our outgoing elders. And that's just the elders.

Of course we have deacons as well here at Morningside. Deacons welcomed our new members, served in Fellowship Hour and made connections with phone calls. To our deacons, we should offer a word of thanks - to Jill and Link and Duncan, a personal word of thanks to you on behalf of the congregation. They too worked innumerable hours. Drew is the minister who works with

the deacons, so I don't have an exact breakdown, but I know they called every member of the congregation. I know they prayed for the congregation at great length, and we're 550 members on paper. We have 12 deacons, two of whom we were short this year, which means - you do the math; the time on the phone alone is stunning. It's also not an advisory board, but a true working Board of Deacons. So we offer them our thanks.

Shortly we will ordain and install our newest class of officers to the church, that is, if they don't run out the doors before we can lay hands on them! In the back, ushers, you have the job of barring their exit should they tried to run. We will install them later to active service.

I don't think that Isaiah had ever encountered a church board, when he wrote his words about the bruised reed and the dimly burning wick, but I think they are *a propos* to those who work on church boards, from time to time. It can be hard work, hard work. Sometimes folks get discouraged. I don't know the exact statistics on elder and deacon burn-out, but I do know that usually as they near the end of their three-year term, they start to get this slightly gleeful look in their eyes, as they say they're wrapping up their service, their three-year term. But of course all of you who served as elders and deacons before know that it is a lifetime office. It doesn't end with their term of service.

And that's the thing about the work of the church, and not just the work of the elders and deacons but of all of us. The fact is that it's never done. It's never, ever done, the work of the church. There's something about that endless task, any endless task, which makes it over time hard to sustain. So while I'm sure Isaiah didn't write his words about the bruised reed or the dimly burning wick to church boards, they make sense. The flame may wane just a bit, from time to time.

I think Isaiah was on to something because the Christian endeavor is not always easy. You live the life of faith; you know it is not always easy. There are people will need to be housed; there are folks who need to be fed; there are folks who need to be visited; there are folks who need to be comforted. If you teach Sunday school, you know there are folks who need to be educated,

sometimes more than we actually get to educate. It never ends. It goes on and on and on. And I wonder sometimes, does the flame begin to smolder, just a bit?

Do you sometimes get discouraged in the living of Christian vocation, and perhaps want a break from the endless expectations? I know it's true of life outside the church as well. We all endeavor to live this Christian life. It's what we signed up for when we were baptized or when we joined the church. But the simple truth of the matter is the Christian life is lived in a world that is not set up to sustain Christian life.

If you are a parent, you have to raise your children to know Jesus Christ in a world that just isn't designed to help you do it all the time. Ballgames compete with Christian vocation. Cheerleading camp is scheduled at 11 o'clock on Sunday mornings. And video games - I assume they're still called that – video games are generally more appealing than listening to a 20 minute sermon and singing hymns. (By the way it's my fault we sang all six verses of the first hymn. I happen to love it, but you can blame me for that.) It's more appealing to sit in front of a television set than to come to church, sometimes isn't it? I know that. I know that. I can tell you, I really, really deeply, profoundly do not care what the Kardashians are doing, but I know sometimes that has its appeal.

Raising children to grow up as Christians in a world not designed to help you do it is probably one of the biggest challenges the church faces today. Maybe you get tired from time to time. I said it before and I'll say it again - I get exhausted sometimes just thinking about what some of our members have to do to live the Christian faith, and that's just within the families.

There is of course, the challenge of being a Christian in the workplace. I've been largely insulated from that challenge by being a minister. By and large, most congregations behave, but I have heard from time to time of some of the dastardly, underhanded, undercutting things that happen to people in the world of business, in order to get ahead and wield a little power. And you all have to go out there and be Christians. I think sometimes it's like throwing the lambs to the wolves.

I imagine Isaiah knew a thing or two about what he wrote. Sometimes the flame smolders, and we wonder if it might not just give out. That's the world we live in, not designed to sustain Christian faith. It surely must seem so much easier to avoid the challenges of faith. You know we could just avoid letting our wicks come into the wind at all. We could hunker down here in this sanctuary and protect our wicks, because we don't want them to get blown out. And it's a tough old world out there, and the only thing we have to throw at that tough old world is the Gospel. The only thing we have to give to the world is the Gospel.

You know, when the apostles went out on the road preaching about Jesus, as we read in Acts this morning, it was not a friendly environment. It was a challenge. It was at times hostile, and all they had was the Gospel. All they had was the story of this Jesus, of how he was born, and how he lived, and what he taught, and how that led him to the cross where he died, and the assurance that God raised this Jesus from the dead. All they had was the Gospel, and that is all that we have, that, and God's promise that no matter how much the flame wanes and waivers and smolders, God never gives up on us. The dimly burning wick, he will not quench.

The Bible has so many words of encouragement throughout it for faith, but I've noticed, as I read through them, that always within that encouragement there is a word of challenge. The challenge is that when the wick begins to smolder, that means it's time to plunge in deeper.

I wonder how often that is the case. When we get to feeling a little down, we need simply to plunge in deeper. I have a confession to make. I got a little mopey this last week; it does happen. Ministers do occasionally get mopey. The reason I got mopey was because I was thinking of our budget the wrong way. Now mind you, I mean mopey. I don't mean out on the ledge. I just mean mopey. And the ledge of my office is on the first floor, so the worst that could happen is I could sprain my ankle. But I did get mopey, because I was discouraged that we hadn't hit goal yet for our budget. By the way, I am not discouraged by our commitment campaign. We raised over \$100,000 in new and increased pledges this year. That is something to be celebrated! But we haven't hit the budget yet. But I know that our commitment campaign has raised \$720,000. I know as well there are more pledges that will come in. I know all of these things. I get it intellectually, but my head was in the wrong place, because I was looking at where we are, where

we need to be, and we're not over the hump. And it got me down, because, you know, it takes money to run this place. And if we don't make it up, we will have to trim it out. That's the cold, hard reality. If we don't make up the budget, we have to trim it out. And I got stuck on what we'd have to trim if we don't raise that last \$70,000.

As I was in this stumped place, I went out to lunch with some clergy colleagues of mine, and a colleague brought out a note and shared it with us. He serves a congregation in a neighborhood that is largely populated by immigrants. His congregation is not wealthy. They live on the razor's edge, financially. He jokingly calls Morningside "Moneybags" anytime he sees me because he knows our capacity for raising money. And in this group of clergy, most of us do serve wealthier churches. He said he'd pinned this note up over his desk "because I wanted it to remind me what discipleship looks like." It was a note that came with a check from a newer member of the church who wrote to say he was so grateful for what the church had done to support him during his recent unemployment that he wanted to give his first paycheck to the church. It was for \$237. My friend said, "That's all he has to live on, \$237 a week, and he gave it to the church."

And like that, my attitude was adjusted. You see, the problem I had was looking at all those figures with a theology of scarcity rather than looking at them with a theology of abundance. I'd been looking at \$720,000 and thinking we're short \$70,000, and not thinking to myself, we can do a lot of good ministry in Atlanta with \$720,000.

That's when I knew the challenge for us as a congregation, the challenge for me as a pastor. When the wick begins to dim just a little bit, plunge in deeper. That's my challenge to you today: to operate out of a theology of abundance and not a theology of scarcity.

The story goes on. I went to the hospital and visited a member of this congregation who was recovering from surgery. As I got back to the church to write this sermon, with my head having recently been adjusted about the theology of scarcity and the theology of abundance - no joke - sitting in my inbox was a check for \$10,000. It was from a member of the congregation, who got Randy Parrish's note about giving and said, "You know, I can do something about that shortfall." And this is where we get to the challenge.

My challenge to you right now is if you haven't pledged and you intend to do your giving to God through Morningside Presbyterian Church: get your pledge card in. The finance team is meeting tomorrow night. Randy Parrish is five rows back on the pulpit side. He will be happy to take your pledge card. That's the first challenge.

The second: if you have already pledged, but you know in your heart you can do more to carry your church family through, do it. Some of us pledge at a level that is sacrificial, and if you are, you know who you are. I'm not talking to you. Some of us know we could do more than we're doing. So my challenge to you is this: if you look at your bank statement and you know you can do more, please do it. That's how we get from here to there.

This is the point where if you're listening to the sermon, you probably realize I'm riffing around that old preacher's joke: We have all of the money that we need to run this church. Unfortunately, however, it is still in your pockets. And that is true.

I am reminded of my colleague at the Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis, who was once asked by his Session to speak to the congregation about money. He got up in the pulpit and said, "I've been asked by the Session to speak to you about money. I consider the matter handled."

That is how I feel about this right now, because that's my third point of challenge. Let's not talk about money any more. I don't want us to need to. I want us to focus on things that are much, much more important.

In that blue box in your bulletin, the Season of Service will be changing throughout the next month, month and a half. You will see different opportunities come up. We're not about, primarily, the raising and spending of money as a congregation. That is not our focus; that is not our function. We are about the sharing and hearing of the Gospel. And that sharing and hearing of the Gospel takes place verbally. But so much more often, that sharing and hearing of the Gospel takes place physically. So I want to challenge you to sign up, to do something, to make a tangible, physical presentation of the Gospel in the living of your life. That's what the Season of

Service is about, because at the end of the day, church is not about us. It can feel like it is at times, but it's not. You, and I, all of us together exist to serve. We have been called by a Servant Savior who calls each of us to live into that.

I'm very aware that this sermon is long on challenge and short on comfort, but God does not call us to be comfortable. God calls us to plunge ahead to carry the word of the Gospel, the work of the Gospel in all that we say and do. That's it. That's the calling. In a few minutes we will ordain and install those who have been called as deacons and elders. Their service is particular, for a particular term, for a particular job, but all of us are called to service. All of us are called to live our lives as a continual thank-offering to God. At times it will be challenging. And sometimes it will feel thankless. But the truth of the Gospel that we share is that in exactly those moments, that is perhaps when we are the closest to God. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.