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Valparaiso University Baccalaureate Sermon: Isaiah 51:9, 1934

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Isaiah 51, 9.

D.P. FREEMAN

(Ep. Sec. Waether
League)

We may safely assume that there have been few commencements in the long and honorable history of this University that have been attended by greater difficulties than this one in the year of our Lord 1934. A few years ago it would have been comparatively easy for your Baccalaureate and Commencement speakers to speak glowingly of youth's part in the modern world and to paint in vivid colors a picture of a world which was waiting for you to be graduated and to take your places in the market places of humanity. All that is past and done. Undoubtedly you feel somewhat bewildered as you leave these quiet halls to make your way in a world which has no room even for those who have served it well, and much less for untried youth.

And yet I must say that I honestly envy you. You are to be congratulated on the fact that you are being graduated from this University in the year 1934. There are particularly two reasons for these felicitations. The first of these is that you are being graduated from a great school. The disaster of our present economic system has had a number of secondary results, and certainly one of them is that we have come to realize more deeply and surely that the greatness of a school does not depend on large endowments and magnificent buildings. Once more we are returning slowly but surely to the ideals of a Christian humanism which confidently assumes that the greatness of any institution of learning depends on its spirit. It is no mere idle aphorism to say that all the essentials of a University are present if Mark Hannah is sitting on one end of a log and a student on the other. The great work of Osler and Gilman at the Johns Hopkins was done in small, dimly lighted rooms which would be considered a disgrace to many of our modern cathedrals of learning. Eight hundred years ago the great teacher Abelard came to Paris with fire in his eyes and wisdom in his heart. At six in the morning students climbed the stairways and stormed the windows of his lecture room

in the hidden streets of Paris. It is the spirit which makes a school great -- the spirit of faculty and students. In this fundamental sense you are being graduated from a great school and I honestly envy you.

But there is also another reason for being envious of you who are being graduated at this particular time in the history of our civilization. It is a strange and terrible world into which you are going, but it is still a beautiful world. It has the beauty of life. No observer of the present world-scene can deny that humanity is once more on the march. The ten years separating your generation from mine are probably among the most important in modern history. Even though they are still hidden from us by the veil which surrounds all history in the making, we can nevertheless be sure that the world twenty-five years from now will be a far different world from the one into which you and I were born. Into this world you are going from a University which has given you a calm, objective, Christian world-view. It is probably true that the crying need of humanity during the next twenty-five years will not be a generation of isolated specialists but a generation of men and women who will bring to the problems of humanity a world-view which can apply the accumulated experience and suffering of the human race to the problems of the troubled present and the veiled future with a sure and Christ-guided hand.

Since our common problems are so immediate and pressing you may wonder what the prophet Isaiah may have to say to you today. The answer is: Much. Standing majestically and alone half way between Moses and our blessed Savior, he was not only one of the world's greatest prophets but also one of its wisest statesman. I should like to point out to you first of all that in the text which I read to you a moment ago, he presents a view of history which the modern world has taken away from us.

The year 1934 marks a number of important anniversaries for our

Lutheran Church. Of particular importance is, of course, the 400th Anniversary of the recovery of the face of Jesus in the modern world through the completed translation of the Bible by Dr. Martin Luther. One anniversary, however, has not been noted in our circles. The year 1934 marks the ^{75"} anniversary of the publication of Darwin's "Origin of Species." Undoubtedly all of you know this book as the basis for a new and popular approach to the ancient theory of the evolution of man from more primitive forms of life. Its popularity went hand in hand with the amazing and unprecedented increase in the practical application of the natural sciences and the gradual rise of the machine as a dominating factor in human life. This combination was too much for the mind of man, and we began gradually to conceive of the history of man as a straight upward line progressing slowly but irresistibly toward a not too far distant goal, a Utopia, an earthly Paradise. All problems would eventually be solved. All questions would be answered. All tears would be dried. This philosophy of life, known in the history of ideas ~~is known~~ as the idea of progress, has dominated the life and thought of most men and women for more than half a century.

The first crack in this dangerously optimistic approach to human life came with the World War. A few men and women saw clearly that despite all our ideas of progress the human heart was essentially the same. In the fields of Flanders lie buried not only the flower of European manhood but also the shattered remains of an entire philosophy of life. And yet -- the World War brought prosperity, and America failed to see the handwriting on the wall. For ten years our watchword was still "progress." Then came October 1929. It took away the thirty pieces of silver which we had been paid for succumbing to a world-view which is contrary not only to the sacred record but to the entire experience of the human race.

Today, I believe, the Century of Progress Exhibition on the shores of Lake Michigan is the last dying gasp of this philosophy of life. There are

the machines, cool, keen, and complete. They have made tremendous contributions to the comforts of humanity. To some extent they have alleviated human suffering and human want. But if you will cross Michigan Boulevard and go a few blocks inland you will see just how much progress we have made with the fundamental problems of humanity. There are the faces of men and women torn and broken by poverty, twisted and distorted by sin, beaten down and crushed by a civilization whose god is the machine and whose prophet is gold. Progress - the progress of a world which must throw the gifts of the Creator into rivers while men and women starve -- the progress of a world which is today once more rushing blindly and headlong into brutal and senseless war -- the progress of a world which stands today helpless and confused in the grip of the fearful results of its long forgetfulness of Christ and the Cross.

Now turn for a moment to the prophet Isaiah. He has no illusions about progress. In the night of his people's despair, - when they had no place to turn - he points -- not forward -- but back to the past -- to the ancient days -- to the generations of old. By the inspiration of the Spirit of the Living God Isaiah had grasped the fundamental fact that it moves in waves that are continually rising and falling under the guiding and controlling hand of the Most High working through the lives of men and women who have surrendered their hearts to Him.

I do not know much about the Christian religion, and the more one studies it the less one seems to know. But one fact becomes clearer as the troubled years go by -- and that is that all the strength and glory and beauty it has brought into the world has been the strength and beauty of surrender. Perhaps one of the most typical and significant scenes in the entire Sacred History is to be found in the Gospel story of the man who came to Jesus with his eyes closed from birth. He had never seen the light of the sun. When Jesus saw him He stooped to the ground, took clay and placed it on those blind eyes. It pleased him to use the dust of the earth to bring sight to those eyes. And so it has pleased Him for two thousand years to use human clay, the dust of the earth, in order to work out his gracious

purposes in the hearts of men. Clay in the hands of the Living God! Here is a philosophy of life for the twentieth century. This and this alone will give again to the world men and women who have surrendered their hearts to the tender and powerful hands of the Most High.

One of our modern dramatists has perhaps caught this fundamental fact more clearly than most men and women. A few years ago he wrote a play entitled "The Terrible Meek." One of its scenes takes us into the last few moments on Calvary. The sun has gone down, the crowds have gone home, the Savior is dead. Only two human beings are still standing in the gathering darkness - Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and the Roman Captain, who has just made his great confession: "Verily, this was a just Man and the Son of God." Mary speaks: "What did you say? I don't understand you. Only a little while ago I heard His blood dripping down here in the darkness. The stones are wet with it. He's dead." The Captain answers: "He's alive." Mary: "Why do you mock me? Are you God that you can kill and make alive, all in one breath?" The Captain: "Listen. He's alive. I can't kill Him. All the empires can't kill Him. How shall hate destroy the power that rules the earth? Listen. I am a soldier. I have been helping to build kingdoms for over twenty years. I have never known any other trade. Soldierly, bloodshed, murder: that's my business. My hands are crimson with it. That's what empire means. . . We stretch out our hands, greedy, grasping, tyrannical, to possess the earth. It can't last: it never has lasted - this building in blood and fear. Already our kingdoms begin to totter. Possess the earth! We have lost it. We never did possess it. I tell you woman, this dead son of yours, disfigured and shamed and spit upon has built a kingdom this day that can never die. The living glory of Him rules it. The earth is His and He made it. He and His own have been moulding and making it through the long ages; they are the only ones who ever really did possess it; not the proud, not the wise, not the wealthy, not the vaunting empires of the world. Something has happened up here on this hill today which will shake all our kingdoms of blood and fear into

dust and ashes. The earth is His, the earth is theirs, and no longer ours. The meek, the terrible meek, the fierce, agonizing meek are about to enter into their inheritance. Theirs is the power and the glory - forever and ever."

The power and the glory -- this is the thing in the Christian religion which the modern world has taken away from us. It is the supreme tragedy of our Christian faith and life that modern youth has come to consider the Christian religion something soft, something which has no definite place in the hardest and most ruthless business civilization the world has ever known. This view is directly opposed to the entire history of Christendom. We need not call the splendid roll of the heroes and saints in order to demonstrate the fact that the Christian religion makes the deepest and most farreaching demands upon all the resources of courage in the human heart. Look for a moment at the memorable picture of St. Paul sitting in the prison at Rome. Twenty-five years had passed since the Lord had met him on the road to Damascus and had told him that he too would become one of those surrendered, driven men who have been the glory of humanity. The twenty-five years had been years of pain and sorrow but also of victory and joy. Now evening time had come. His cell in the Roman prison was the headquarters of the Christian Church -- but it was also his vestibule to death. Before he died he wanted to write once more to those whom he had brought to faith in Christ. He wanted to tell them exactly what his life had meant to him. As he was looking about for some suitable illustration he suddenly noticed that everything about him was marked with the stamp of the Imperial Caesar. The utensils from which he ate and drank bore the mark of Caesar. The chains which held his wrists to the wall bore the stamp of Caesar. The palm of the guard who stood at the door bore the mark of Caesar. And so St. Paul turned to his tablet and wrote the memorable words "I bear branded on my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." He rolled up his sleeve where there were great marks from the time he had been stoned at Phillippi. He uncovered his shoulder, still marked and bruised from the time he had been stoned at Lystra. His entire body bore the marks of the Lord Jesus. Certainly there was nothing soft about that life.

If you will bring to the problems of humanity a deep and abiding faith in the atoning Christ, you too will bear marks. The world has changed and your marks will no longer be physical. They will be the more terrible and lasting marks of the spirit. They will result from the fearful indifference of the world, from its open contempt for the message of the Cross and its fearful coldness over against the blessed warmth of the Savior. Your marks will not come from open hostility. They will come from the passive resistance and the callous indifference of those who do not understand the Christian way of life. In order to bear those marks in the full strength of surrender you will have to turn to the strength of which Isaiah speaks -- the strength of the ancient days.

One more word and I am done. Sixty years after Calvary and the Cross, an old man sat before a cave on a little island in the Aegean Sea. As he gazed out over the waves which beat against the shore with monotonous thundering, a troubled, infinitely weary look came into his old eyes. A few weeks before he had received the command from the Lord God to write seven letters to seven churches in Asia. Four had been written. The fifth was now to be begun. It was to be one of the most terrible indictments in the history of divine revelation -- the letter to the church at Sardis, once the dwelling place of Croesus the richest king of classical antiquity and now a center of the world's trade and commerce. Into this church St. John the Beloved was to hurl the thunder bolt of divine wrath. He begins his ominous task with the words: "Thou hast a name that thou livest and art dead". You who were to be living coals in the furnaces of Jesus Christ have become cold blocks of ice in a church that is dead. You are dead from your stupid head down to your stiff knees and stony heart. There is no health in your palsied hands and no living worship on your icy lips.

And then, suddenly and magnificently, St. John turns the picture. Not all were dead. Not all had turned away from the altars of the living God. There were still a few living coals under the dead ashes. On these St. John turns the spotlight of divine revelation: Thou hast a few names, even in Sardis who have not defiled

their garments. And they shall walk with me in white.

It is this picture which I should like to keep of you during the days and years that lie before us -- the few among the many -- the pure amid the defiled -- the victorious among the defeated -- those walking in white with Jesus. Then you will be a glorious company. Over your way through life will be my prayer that God may bless you and keep you forever.