

**IT'S NOT ABOUT DOWNSIZING: CHURCH AND THE COMMON COUNCIL  
EXODUS 32:1-4; PHILIPPIANS 4:1-9  
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Let me tell you at the start of this sermon where I want to end up. I want to end today by telling you how I intend to vote on November 6<sup>th</sup> on the question of downsizing the common council. I also want to tell you briefly what I think of possible war with Iraq.

No, this is not a lecture on political science or current events. This is a sermon. Yet, I believe these topics are relevant for a sermon for at least one reason.

We live our lives *in* the world. Some religious communities do not. Some religious communities live *apart from* the world or *against* the world or *too much with* the world.

Yet, Presbyterians for hundreds of years have tried to live our lives in ways that make for a better world. This is integral to our understanding of who God calls us to be and what God calls us to do. This understanding of “Christ and culture,” as Richard Niebuhr called it, is dear to the heart of this congregation. You can see it in everything from our Understanding Islam series to our tutoring program.

As your pastor, I feel a responsibility to comment on matters we face as a city and nation. I know better than to tell you how to vote. But I would like to raise some biblical guideposts for you to consider as you do vote or write to the President. I also want to offer some reflections on the role this congregation plays in some of the questions facing our wider community.

Let me begin with “The Bourne Identity” which my son Ian and I saw this summer. As a confirmed Robert Ludlum fan I could not resist catching Matt Damon in this tale of international political intrigue. A good movie, it had the requisite bad guys, Swiss bank accounts, martial arts, and a car chase through narrow European streets.

The story is about an agent who suffers amnesia after a dramatic rescue at sea. The agent, Jason Bourne, struggles to find out his identity, which he does.

As the title of the movie implies this is a birthing process. When Bourne realizes he is a highly trained government operative he decides to listen to a deeper voice within...beckoning him to leave behind his life of secrecy and darkness and enter into a new life of openness and relationship.

I believe Buffalo, like Jason Bourne, is searching to find our true identity. Every debate that comes along: regionalism, casino gambling, budget cuts at City Hall, shrinking common council – every debate is a pre-text for a much bigger question: Who is Buffalo?

In the process we are compared to Milwaukee, Detroit, Green Bay, Rochester and others. Yet, we will not find out who we are by comparing ourselves to other cities. We will find out who we are, if we listen to a deeper voice; if we can give birth to the great city, the great nation, that lives in our collective heart.

Groups do have identities. Go to Home Depot – each staff member is only too glad to help you. Talk to M&T employees. They, not just their chairman Robert Wilmers, are committed to this city. Groups have identities. Who is the great church, city, nation we are called to be?

**Biblical guidepost one:** Moses on Mt. Sinai. This is a great story from the bible when it comes to the subject of collective vision and soul-searching. We pick up the story today with Moses on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments, deliberating with God.

The people back at the base camp are getting restless and rebellious. They forget who brought them out of Egypt and saved them from Pharaoh's army. They seek to remake God in their own image. "Come make gods for us," they say to Aaron, "gods who shall go before us. As for Moses, the man who brought us out of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."

You know the rest of the story. Aaron fashions a golden calf – a symbol of the fertility cult the people left in Egypt. How quickly they revert to old gods, old behaviors, old self-destructive patterns. Yahweh isn't pleased. He pledges to destroy the people. But Moses intercedes. If the Egyptians see the people destroyed, says Moses, they will conclude Yahweh is just like all the other gods. So Yahweh recants plans to destroy the people.

What is interesting to me about this story is that Israel's theophany – the giving of the law – *and* Israel's idolatry – the making of the golden calf – take place on the same mountain, at the same time. It is a snapshot of Israel's best and worst.

Granted Moses has been on the mountain a long time. It was way back in chapter 20 and here we are in 32 the Lord called Moses to ascend the mountain. What is happening on the summit is a kind of Continental Congress between Moses and the Lord. They are working out how the people will live in harmony with one another and God. The Ten Commandments, the entire covenant code, laws of restitution, social and religious rituals, a long range plan that includes the conquest of Canaan, all of these issues are being worked out by Moses and God.

You can't totally blame the people for getting restless. But before Moses goes up the mountain the Lord makes an appearance you would think no one would forget. Smoke, fire, earthquake. The people, says the writer of Exodus, shake in their sandals.

Now with their leader gone they forget everything he told and promised them. Spiritual amnesia sets in. They forget who they are. They forget who God is calling them to be. What they remember and cling to are the old values and beliefs of Egypt, of bondage.

Under the right conditions humans reject the new life and freedom God promises and embrace idols that enslave and burden us. It is a profound truth and irony.

Martin Luther, commenting on the idolatry of his age said, a god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe him with your whole heart. The trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol.

When life gets tough as it is now in the city of Buffalo with a struggling economy or in our nation after the trauma of 9/11 and a three year decline in the stock market, spiritual amnesia can set in. We can be like Jason Bourne searching for an identity.

Our trust and faith can shift from our best self, our true self, the self God calls us to be. We sometimes seek refuge in old self-destructive ways with such resolve and conviction that we create idols right and left. It is dangerous business.

**Biblical guidepost two:** this morning's reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians. The church at Philippi and Israel at the base camp have some things in common. Both are in survival mode: Israel in the wilderness; the church at Philippi amidst religious persecution. Both are without leaders. Moses is away talking to God. Paul is in prison.

What does Paul say in his letter? He admonishes the people to stand firm in the Lord. This might be the letter Moses would have written if he had it to do over again and if there was courier service or email from atop Mt. Sinai. In the verses preceding today's lesson Paul refers to, Euodia and Syntyche, two leaders of the church who disagree. Scholars debate what the disagreement was. But it doesn't really matter. Paul urges unity. Be of one mind he says. If you are at odds with one another you will be vulnerable to the forces that seek to destroy you.

Finally, he says whatever is true or honorable or just or pure, whatever is pleasing or commendable, if there is any excellence, anything worthy of praise think about these things. And keep on doing what you have heard and seen and learned in me and the peace of God will be with you.

Pretty good advice for persons or groups or cities or nations or congregations facing challenging times. Stand firm in truth. Be united. Follow every example of honorable living wherever you can find it or encounter it or get your hands on it.

If the story from Exodus today is a diagnosis of a community in survival mode, the story from Philippians is a spiritual formula for communities struggling to survive, struggling to be faithful to the deeper vision and voice within them.

What I believe is at the heart of our struggle today as a city is not downsizing per se. It is a much larger question of what kind of city and what kind of citizens we are going to be.

**Now a few reflections on Westminster's role as our community struggles to find its true and best self.** Sometimes I think we downplay that role. We defer too easily.

We let others take the lead. That is entirely appropriate when you are partnering with a neighborhood building a Habitat for Humanity home. You want to defer.

But when it comes to forging a future for our city, when it comes to being a voice for peace then we are hard-pressed to defer. Why? Because the membership of this church has been blessed with deep talent and leadership.

I say this not to discount anyone or any congregation or to inflate or puff up our egos. I say this observing the educational and occupational levels of the members of this church. I say this seeing how so many of you already give your time and talent. I say this observing those with whom many of you move in the wider circles of Western New York and beyond.

We are living in an age of testing. Our city, our nation, our congregation this year in our stewardship challenge – are facing tests to our wisdom and strength like we have not seen in some time. Tests some among us who are young have never seen.

If you think you are alone in this, or if we think we are alone as a city or nation or church we have only to look at Jesus and remember how he was tested.

With the increase of strength comes the increase of testing and temptation. The more you can do the more you are tempted not to do.

Just as with the people in the wilderness and the church at Philippi our character and strength as a city and nation are being tested.

But I ask you to remember the scripture that says, “testing produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope.” The path to wisdom and understanding, the path to listening to the voice deep within us, the path to God’s voice calling us to be our best self, our true self, the path to these things is character.

The reason people and organizations make poor life decisions is not IQ. It is character. It is not enough to be gifted and intelligent unless our gifts and intelligence are wedded to strong character. I mean the kind of character the bible talks about that comes from endurance.

The problem with the people on Mt. Sinai is they were tired of enduring. I am not advocating masochism. I am advocating staying the course.

I am talking being willing to place the ultimate end and purpose of your life in the larger narrative of God’s people. Being willing to place the ultimate end and purpose of the human family in that larger story of what God is doing from beginning to end.

An overarching story you and I have the privilege of joining our stories to that does not depend on any one of us alone but all of us together and God.<sup>1</sup>

As I look at our leaders at City Hall in the present debate and some of our leaders in Washington with regard to the pursuit of so-called regime change in Iraq, frankly I do not see that kind of character.

What I see at the table in common council and at the White House is an absence of humility. A preoccupation with intimidation and force. A willingness to operate unilaterally rather than collaboratively.

The current struggle we face as a city and as a nation is not about downsizing the common council or making a pre-emptive strike against Saddam Hussein. The struggle we face is about the character with which we live our lives and make our decisions. It is about listening to the voice deep within each of us to live with integrity and honor and courage.

Oh yes, November 6<sup>th</sup>? I am going to vote to downsize the common council. Some perceive that plan as racist. I don’t and I will continue to work to build bridges across the very real racial divide in our city.

Possible war with Iraq? To do so without a broad base of international and Muslim support would be foolhardy and arrogant. I pray our President has the character to understand that. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock, sermon preached at the Chautauqua Institution, summer 2001. CD