

Passwords

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Sunday, June 6, 2010

When I was a kid there were two numbers I tried to keep in my head at all times. One was my own home phone number in case I got lost or in trouble and needed to call home. The other number was the combination to my locker at school. Combination locks were, in those days, sort of high-tech. You didn't need a key, you see. Keys get lost. Combinations don't. And combinations were, well, kind of mysterious and private and secure. Of course, you had to *remember* the combination and also the nice little litany of turns that went with the numbers: once all the way around to clear, three turns to the right, two to the left, one back to the final number. But once you got it, you had it. It was your secret.

Even in those days, though, you had to be careful who you shared your combination with. My friend Simon once suggested we share combinations as friends. After all, what are friends for? We exchanged combinations and the next day I ended up with a bag of garbage from the cafeteria at the bottom of my locker, dripping....well, I never was too sure what it was. And Simon's combination? A fake. Welcome to the world of eighth grade boys!

Those days seem so simple now! Today I don't own a combination lock. Instead, I have **passwords!** That's right: **passwords.** I have a password to my computer. I have a password to my email. Actually, I have two email passwords to different email accounts. I have a password to my Facebook page which I forget to use and constantly have to look up. I have a password to my online banking which is different from my bank's credit card and I get the two confused. I have a password to my daughter's school's parent portal on the school website. I never thought I would have to use that one, but now her grades and teacher comments come on line. Also the bills. I have a password to the financial aid websites that help dig me deeper in debt for her education. I have a password, for God's sake, to my biblical research website. Should I go on?

So here's my question! Do I feel any safer now? What do *you* think?

How do *you* keep track of *your* passwords? See, here is where I have a problem. I used to have all these passwords I couldn't remember. I tried keeping a list in my wallet, which was silly and not safe. Then I tried using one password for all my accounts until one day somebody hacked into my credit card – and then the bank account. So much for one-password-fits-all! So I finally hit on a solution. I took the names of all the dogs and cats my mother has ever owned (that I can remember) and I assigned one pet name to each password. Fortunately, my mother loves animals and the number of pet names hasn't yet been exceeded by the number of needed passwords. The last one will be the name of a male cat (and favorite of mine when I was a teenager) who brought his girl friend in from a storm one night into our garage to have kittens in the back of our convertible VW – and stayed. We called him, the dad cat, Putty-tat.

Now, I ask you. Who would ever think of Putty-tat as a password for a sixty year old pastor?

Should I even be telling you this?

My point is that for all the passwords I can come up with to guard what assets I have in this world, *I don't feel any safer*. And if your accounts have ever been hacked into, or your identity “stolen,” you know what a violation it feels like! It feels like somebody has tapped into your soul and drained off some essence of what makes you – *you!*

Tell me: since when did our sense of security depend on the number and cleverness of our passwords?

There is a very different view of our security offered this morning in the passage from Ecclesiastes. All our times and seasons are held by God. Our safety does not lie in trying to figure it all out, neither the ups nor the downs, but in trusting what we have been given. In a lovely verse just beyond our selection this morning, the text says: *I know whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken away*. We are part of God's “doing.” Nothing need be added to us. Nothing can be taken away. We are free to pay attention to this moment of our living, secure in the conviction that our beginnings and our endings have already been cared for!

Inside each one of us is a piece of God, a reflection of God's holiness, a light that comes into the world through us. Although we cannot add to the light or take anything away from it, we can lose sight of it. We lose sight of the light when, in the course of our ups and downs, we forget that it is there. We lose sight when we get afraid and begin to believe we are lost or separated from God. We lose sight when we suspect that the darkness of the world is so great and the light we carry is too small or too damaged to be retrieved.

I remember a story about a small village in eastern Europe many years ago. The village had no church of its own, until a generous merchant decided to build one. It was a simple, open, inviting and lovely church, just big enough for the people of the town and a few guests. But the church had one odd feature. The building had no lighting of its own. Instead, along the wall on all sides were hooks where lanterns might hang. On the day the church opened, to great joy and celebration, every person who arrived was given a lantern to hang on the wall – and afterwards to take home! The church was bright and beautiful with its many lanterns! And then the merchant told everyone to take their lanterns home – and always to bring their lanterns back to light the church. *Some part of the church*, he said, *will always be dark unless you bring your light!*

No, I am not trying to “guilt” you into coming to church every Sunday to light the church! I am reminding you not to leave your light unbidden inside you, but to call it out and bring it *wherever* you go -- the world needs *your* light to see by. And your *real* security lies in seeing that a piece of God goes *wherever you go!*

Because we are human and we wonder about our means and ends, perhaps a password would, after all, be helpful. A password that reminds us we are not lost or forgotten. A password that reminds us that we (each of us), and we (all of us) carry a piece of God inside. The password is no secret. You can say it out loud or in the silence of your own heart. You can say it to yourself in all times and seasons: *I bring my light!* You will see by your password that you have already all you need.

Amen